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JAMES VRAILLE:

THE STORY OF A LIFE.

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The Story of a Life.

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BY

JEFFERY C. JEFFERY. [pseud.]

"Here is a gentleman, whom by chance I met."—*Taming of the Shrew*.

["Upon whose faith and honour I repose."—*The Two Gentlemen of Verona*.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

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“So it seems to our eyes; but the eyes of children are anointed with a divine elay. And our eyes were so anointed long ago; but either time has rubbed off the precious unguent, or we have washed it off ourselves with careless hands.”

D'ARCY THOMPSON.

“It is beautiful, but not the most beautiful. There is another life, hard, rough and thorny, trodden with bleeding feet and aching brow: the life of which the cross is the symbol: a battle which no peace follows, this side the grave; which the grave gapes to finish before the victory is won; and—strange that it should be so—this is the highest life of man.”

FROUDE.

“Thus, like a God-created, fire-breathing spirit-host, we emerge from the inane; haste stormfully across the astonished earth, then plunge again into the inane. Earth's mountains are levelled and her seas filled up in our passage. Can the earth, which is but dead and a vision, resist spirits which have reality and are alive? On the hardest adamant some foot-print of us is stamped in; the last rear of the host will read traces of the earliest van. But whence? Oh heaven! whither? Sense knows not; faith knows not; only that it is through mystery to mystery, from God to God.”

CARLYLE.

JAMES VRAILLE.

CHAPTER I.

THREE GENERATIONS.

PICCADILLY had on its old yellow-and-brown winter suit, and looked so dowdy and dismal that the heavens were half inclined to cry over it, which would only have made matters worse. The road was muddy, the pavement greasy, everything and everybody damp. The fog was not so dense as to necessitate the supplementing of daylight with gaslight in order to see, but thick enough to make driving difficult, cabmen swear and policemen pretty busy.

The hoarse voices of itinerant vendors were huskier than ever that raw, unwholesome morning. People ran up against one another, and opened their mouths to apologise—if they did so at all—grudgingly, for fear of admitting the fog. The weather was not conducive to civility; and a tall man in an ulster, who strode along eastward with bent head and frowning brow, was no more polite than his neighbours. He was evidently a gentleman, but, quite as evidently, one who did not study personal appearances too minutely.

He reached the Burlington Arcade, up which he

turned. In one of the shop-windows an assortment of photographs of "professional" celebrities had attracted the attention of a small crowd, and he, too, stopped to look.

"Very beautiful, no doubt," he said, and hurried on, for his remark had diverted the general gaze from the window to himself.

He did not stop again until he reached the Albany. Mr. Vraille was at home, and Major Vraille was admitted.

"Well, Jim, my boy, how are ye this beastly morning?" boomed Uncle Ben's voice. "Looking a little better than when you first came up, eh? London done you good?—that's right. Sit down, boy, sit down, and let's have a chat."

Flinging off his coat, Vraille drew an arm-chair up to the fire. Changed as he was, his time-honoured designation remained the same. He was now in no sense a boy; his boyhood had left none of its boyishness behind, and, in spite of his short grey hair, he was far from approaching the "old boy" period of life. He looked sallow and thin, but he was "right as a trivet," he said, "and as strong as a horse again." Then he asked after the old gentleman's health.

Now Uncle Ben was actually an old boy—an old boy whose life's labour was over, whose rest had come in the shape of Albany Chambers and nothing to do. The office had been closed, not so much because the old lawyer had wearied of law, as on account of the law wearying of him.

"A good bit better than I have been," he said, "and there's not much the matter with me now, except the incurable complaint. Fogs don't suit my time of life,

that's all. But what," he asked, heartily enough, "have you been doing with yourself lately?"

"As much as most men in any given fortnight. I've seen everything said to be worth seeing in London—nearly all the theatres, and most of the music-halls; but farces are not so funny as they used to be, I think, and there seems to be more vulgarity and less wit about the popular songs of the day than ever."

"Perhaps so," said Uncle Ben; "I don't know. Anything else?"

"Oh, yes; I've dined out, lunched out, and supped out; I've been to an 'at home' or two, and if you throw in three or four concerts, a few picture-galleries and an oratorio, you have the lot."

"I'm glad you've been enjoying yourself," said Uncle Ben, slowly, as he offered his nephew a cigar.

"I did not say that. You asked me what I had been doing. The time that I haven't spent with you has been spent as I say. Enjoyment! I've lost my capacity for enjoyment, I think. These things used to amuse me once—no, they never did! I was a fool to suppose they would now. You see, this place, St. Dogwells, where I am quartered, is a wretched place. I have read of the 'dull apathy and sordid pettishness' of small country towns, and that about describes St. Dogwells. It is worse than deadly—it is deadly-lively; the Dogwellites won't let me alone. I came to London to enjoy myself; but it has been a failure. In spite of the loneliness of Fort Gaunt, I'd sooner spend my evenings night after night in my barrack-room alone, than spend them at the Slasher with the crew I met there yesterday. It seems a ridiculous thing to say,

but sometimes I think I'd like to leave the service altogether and travel."

The old man looked attentively at his nephew for some time without speaking, and then said—

"Light your cigar, my boy."

Vraille lighted his cigar, and when he had puffed it into a glow, continued—

"The spirit of unrest is upon me. When I'm at St. Dogwells I want to be in London, when I'm in London I want to go back. I'm naturally restless, I suppose. When I was in England I wished to be in India. Although I looked forward to coming home like anything, I think now I would go out again if I had the chance. We never know when we are well off, do we?"

"Jim," said Uncle Ben, solemnly, taking his cigar from his mouth and waving it up and down impressively, "you are talking nonsense. Remember the old motto : 'Know thyself.' There never was a Vraille who did more credit to that motto than you did—up to a few months ago. Are you going to undo all you have done? No; you can't do that. But I am sorry, boy, to hear you talk like this; all the more sorry because I know what you are made of, and that in the past you lived to prove——"

"I lived to see a paper thrust before a dying man, and a pen put into his hand too late! It was all vague and dreamy; I was too sick to know properly what was going on; but I remember thinking it would make her proud of me: Dr. Dick told me all about it afterwards, for I believe I was a bit off my head. Dare was sane enough, but he had put off signing that

paper from day to day, saying he would see to it when he got well. He put it off too long ; he died before he could write his name. My recommendation never got beyond the hospital walls. What did she care ? ”

“ But every one knew of it.”

“ Not every one—only a few. It was all represented afterwards ; Dick took the matter up and pushed it forward. I had a letter from him this morning, saying it was hopelessly blocked—not that it matters much now.”

“ But the honour is the same, Jim ; the honour is the same.”

“ Honour ! ” he cried, springing to his feet and flinging out his arm as if he were going to deliver a speech upon the subject ;—“ don’t talk to me of honour, uncle.” There he stopped, and, seating himself again, said quite quietly, “ But it’s a poor thing—easily won, easily lost ; and not worth getting excited about.”

Then the lawyer, rather than the uncle, argued with him. He took the thing to heart altogether too absurdly ; his case was common enough ; he was to be congratulated on getting so well out of a bad bargain. All that remained to be done was to take the necessary steps to rid himself of a worse than useless encumbrance, and forget the past as soon as possible.

Jim sighed. That was such an easy thing to say—such an impossible thing to do. It seemed to him that in the future he would live in the past. He was lonely, and although he knew that he had always been lonely—forced back into himself—he regretted the past, and wished, not that it could be again, but that it were not irretrievably gone. It is so hard to leave behind

any defined period of time—so hard to pass the milestones of life. No state of being is changed for another state without some regrets.

"All you say is true, uncle," he said; "the past lies behind me, a wreck; the future is before me, but it is empty. There is the pity of it. Ah! for the boy's sake, if not for mine, I wonder she did not stop to think. But I believe now she never cared a rap more for him than she did for me. No woman could care for me, perhaps—I am not that sort of man, most likely—but I thought all women loved their children. Uncle Ben," he said with impressive earnestness, "I married one that didn't."

The lawyer did not seem particularly surprised at this revelation; but, after looking at his nephew for some time, with a light of admiration gradually kindling in his eyes, suddenly burst out with—

"Jim, you married a fool."

"It is curious," said Vraillé, simply, "that before our marriage I should have told her that folly worked an infinity of mischief in the world. There is that man; she has done him as much harm almost as she has done me, if that were any consolation, which it isn't. He had no idea she was going to join him, I verily believe; but as she claimed his protection, he, from some sense of honour which I do not pretend to understand, gave it to her; he lost a very desirable appointment in consequence, and his career is practically ruined. When I got her letter—that first day, you know—I wanted to go after her, indeed I did. She said I had driven her from me, and that she had gone to some one who was always kind. Oh! I thought

I could pardon her folly ; but when Judith showed me I was bent on a fool's errand, when she had told me more—much more than I did not know till then—I knew that it would be useless, and—and I could not go. It is as well, perhaps, I did not. There is no knowing how it might have ended ; but, anyway, the indignity, the disgrace, without a shadow of hope beyond, was more than I could bear. She had deceived and tricked me to the last ; and if she was ever fond of any human being beside herself—which I doubt—she was fond of that man. She never was of me—never ! ”

“ And in the meantime, remember you are tied to her.”

“ She shall have her freedom ; but what is the good of freedom to me ? My life is broken up—wasted.”

“ Jim, my boy,” said the old gentleman in an altered tone, getting up out of his chair and laying his hand on the other’s shoulder, “ I am very sorry for you.”

“ I can’t bear kindness,” said Jim, sinking his head into his hands ; “ speak to me as you were speaking just this minute—quietly and coolly—and I can tell you anything you want to know. But don’t be kind, if you wish me to talk sensibly.” He raised his head and dropped his hands. “ I can read or hear,” he said, “ of children starving unmoved and without seeming to care a rush ; but when I am told that some one has brought them bread at last, that is what I cannot stand ; that sort of thing, I mean. It is easier to bear harshness and cruelty and coldness than a kind word. Kindness finds out weakness. One kind word from Lucy—only one—would have gained my

whole forgiveness. It never came. Go back and sit down again, Uncle Ben ; be as you were before. I want to get hard and cold like the rest of the world—as a man should be. Don't remind me of what I know *you* are ; don't be kind.”

“ Poor old Jim ! ” said Uncle Ben. “ Time will be kinder to you, boy, than ever I could hope to be.”

He walked away then to the other side of the room, and stood with his back to Jim, looking out of the window. The view was limited to a few square yards of bricks and mortar ; but little as there was to be seen, he probably saw less : for he stood there with vacant eyes, tapping one of his waistcoat buttons with the gold rim of his *pince-nez*, and softly hissing rather than whistling a little tune with his lips. Presently he left off hissing, and fixing his *pince-nez* securely in position, craned his head down sideways against the window-pane, and looked up open-mouthed at the sky. The fog appeared to be lifting, and a certain brightness in the heavy atmosphere seemed to hint that the afternoon would not be altogether so dismal as the morning had been.

“ I believe it's going to clear,” he said, turning round and wriggling his nose free of the spring of his glasses, which he caught deftly in his hand as they fell. “ Have you anything particular to do ? ”

“ No, nothing particular,” said Jim, who with his hands in his pockets, his legs stretched out, his chin on his chest, sat looking at the fire ; then, rousing up—“ only to see the boy this afternoon. I go back to St. Dogwells to-morrow, you know.”

“ Well, what do you say to a bottle of claret at the

Club? Then, if you like, we can go and see the boy together afterwards."

To this arrangement Jim willingly assented; and when he had helped the old gentleman to struggle into a heavy fur-lined coat, they were almost ready to start.

"Oh, by the way," he exclaimed, "there is a letter for you, Jim. It was sent on here yesterday from the office. I put it on the table to give you when you came, and precious near forgot it. However, here it is."

Vraille took the letter and looked at it listlessly. The envelope was large and square, the paper thick, the handwriting unknown to him; it was probably an offer to lend him money to any extent on the shortest notice and easiest terms. He received many such; and as his uncle's office had been his business address while in India, he was neither interested nor surprised. Uncle Ben was waiting with his hand on the door, so, putting the letter in his pocket, he followed him into the street, and by the time they had reached the staid old club of which Mr. Vraille was a respected member, had forgotten it altogether.

"I have been thinking," said Uncle Ben, sipping his claret and smacking his lips between each sip, "that in your place I should be inclined to take that boy with me to St. Dogwells. Why don't you? He'd be a companion."

"Well, I have thought of it sometimes," said Jim; "but then—oh, I don't know; it would be a curious sort of anomaly, wouldn't it—a man of my age with a baby and no wife in a place like that? No one down there has the least idea I am married. I am a sort of

fraud, you see ; I can't give out I am a widower, I can't say I am anything, and I thought I'd wait and let—let newspaper correspondents answer awkward questions for me first."

"Mrs. Flight does not care about children, Jim, and you can't expect to leave him there for ever."

"No," said Jim, thoughtfully, "and it was awfully good of her to take him at all. 'Pon my word," he continued with a curious smile, the first indication of amusement his face had shown that day, "it would be rather fun to take him to St. Dogwells. Lord, how they would cackle and jaw!"

"But apart from that, I thought you were fond of the boy."

"So I was, uncle ; so I was—so I am now, but gall has been mixed with everything that used to be sweet and wholesome ; it has poisoned all my thoughts and feelings. When I go to Cabstand Square, there is the dreary remembrance of what Cabstand Square used to be ; when I see the boy, I think of all that might have been, and is not, and never can be now. Oh ! I detest Cabstand Square, and, kind as Mrs. Flight always is to me, I hate going there. The boy will soon forget me altogether."

The good understanding which had existed between father and son in those past Simla days had been rudely broken, and for weeks afterwards Jim had scarcely seen his child. On the voyage home, his opportunities of improving their acquaintance had not been numerous, and shortly after landing, he had been ordered to Fort Gaunt, St. Dogwells. So that circumstances had rather tended to estrange big and little

Jim. The situation now was awkward ; Mrs. Flight had expressed a strong desire to make some reparation for the injury she said she had done him in allowing him to marry her daughter, whom she declared, in somewhat forcible terms, she would never see again, and had insisted on Judith and little Jim making Cabstand Square their home until her son-in-law was settled. Vraille had no option but to comply, and the matter once arranged, Mrs. Flight requested that Lucy's name might never again be mentioned in her hearing. His occasional visits to Cabstand Square were, consequently, rendered somewhat perfunctory, and his interviews with Mrs. Flight constrained. Whenever he could he avoided her altogether, and confined his attentions to Judith and little Jim. The Irish Question, Free Trade, Universal Franchise, and such like matters, did not interest him much just then ; and he knew that, although Mrs. Flight was civility itself, she cared more for a pungent diatribe on Mr. Gladstone's latest transgression than for all the babies in the world. It was Judith Foresight whom he went to see, for little Jim's welfare, he felt pretty certain, was left almost entirely in her hands. But not so altogether ; for Uncle Ben had volunteered, with much show of importance, to take upon himself the responsibilities of general supervision in his nephew's absence. And so thoroughly had the old gentleman entered into the spirit of this duty, so serious had he considered his obligations, that he had never allowed more than a couple of days to pass without making a personal inspection of little Jim's nursery. On the few occasions when he had failed in this respect, confined to

his bed by the doctor's orders, he had invariably sent his man-servant with messages for Judith and paper bags for little Jim. These messages were just as useless as his visits, for he no more thought of giving directions than of finding fault, but they answered his purpose—whatever that was.

"Do you mind, uncle," Jim asked as they descended the Club steps, "coming round by the Lowther Arcade? It is not much out of our way."

The old gentleman exploded.

"Bless you," he exclaimed, "I *always* go that way!"

So they proceeded to the Lowther Arcade, and there looked at the toys displayed on all sides, without either of them in the least knowing how to set about to choose—where choice was unlimited—what, out of so much, the boy would like best.

Uncle Ben, after a heated discussion with a young lady who wanted to force an air-gun upon him in spite of his objections to its danger, left her shop in dudgeon without buying anything, and repaired to another, which, as the proprietor remarked, he turned inside out before finally settling on a box of tin soldiers and a clock-work engine.

"All boys," he said to Jim, "like soldiers and engines."

"But don't you think," objected Vraille, "that he is rather too young to appreciate an engine? What do you say to this?" He touched a spring on the side of a square box he held in his hand. The lid opened, and the infuriated countenance of an aged man appeared with a squeak. Jim laughed.

"That!" cried Uncle Ben, indignantly. "I say it is enough to frighten any child into a fit."

"Perhaps you're right," said Jim, meekly putting down the jack-in-the-box, and, to appease the disappointed shopman, buying instead a dozen marbles.

"Well," exclaimed Uncle Ben, as the marbles and their monetary equivalent changed hands, "you know less about this job than I do; engines come before marbles, anyway. I'll have that engine now, in spite of what you say."

So Uncle Ben made his purchase, and after rejecting a pair of skates, which the shopman said would come in handy if there was a frost, they moved off, discussing the possibilities of stabling a rocking-horse in little Jim's nursery.

"I have it!" cried Jim, suddenly, when they had almost agreed to abandon the rocking-horse idea. "He was always fond of animals; a Noah's Ark is the very thing."

"Won't he suck the paint off?" asked Uncle Ben with some anxiety.

"Humph!" said Jim, with a slowness due partly to doubt, partly to disappointment, "I did not think of that. But surely," he added, brightening up, "surely there must be such a thing as an unpainted Ark."

Uncle Ben was uncertain, and after making one or two inquiries without success, they agreed to take opposite sides of the Arcade and search independently for an unpainted Ark, inhabited by a similarly achromatic Noah and menagerie—the finder to be the possessor.

This arrangement answered excellently. Each was

free to make any intermediate purchases he thought advisable without being subjected to adverse criticism from the other; and the two gentlemen met together at the end of the Arcade looking rather like a couple of animated Christmas-trees.

The unpainted Ark, which Jim had been lucky enough to secure, when wrapped in brown paper, made a rather formidable parcel. As the simplest method of carrying it, Major Vraillé tied it to his stick, adjusting it so that it would balance a wooden horse at the other end.

"I think that's all," he said, straightening his back when his arrangements were completed.

The two men looked at one another and simultaneously burst out laughing.

"Uncle, what a generous old fellow you are!"

"What a fool you do look, Jim; come on!"

A four-wheeler took them to Cabstand Square. Mrs. Flight, they discovered, was not at home, so they requested the girl who opened the door to them to inform Mrs. Foresight of their arrival, ascended three flights of stairs, deposited their parcels in the little front room apportioned exclusively to Master Vraillé as a sitting-room, and awaited the course of events. They had not long to wait.

"All right," came Mrs. Foresight's voice, sharp and clear, from the adjoining room, "sha'n't be a minute. Say he's ready all but his 'air."

The girl said nothing of the sort—there was no need—but before her footfall was out of hearing, Judith appeared with little Jim in her arms.

She set him on the floor.

"Now, make your bow like a little gentleman," she said.

The little figure (quite two feet of it now) bent forward and down until the little hands touched the toes of a pair of tiny shoes, and a small voice, rendered husky by intervening linen, said—

"Mornin', daddee!"

"Bravo!" shouted Uncle Ben.

"There's a good boy," said Vraille.

"Yes, but get up again," said Judith.

But Master Jim's fingers, once brought into the near proximity of brand-new red shoes, could not be so easily recalled; they wandered over the shiny leather and plucked at the confining buttons as if desirous of unfastening them.

"No, no," said Judith, "stand up again, like a man. He allus does spoil his tricks afore company," she added regretfully.

He stood up straight with a jerk, and holding out one foot to his visitors, said—

"Noo 'oos, 'ook! Boy got noo—" staggered, and fell with a sudden flop into a sitting position. "Boy cummle down 'gain," he explained, with a look of mingled astonishment and distress on his upturned face.

"So you did. Well, never mind, old chap," cried Jim, picking him up in his arms. "Come and see what Uncle Ben has brought."

Uncle Ben, meanwhile, had unpacked a drum, and was playing it and a penny whistle with as much earnestness as any Punch-and-Judy showman.

"'Ant it t'umpet," said the boy, holding out his arms.

"He will put in them *its*," Judith explained apologetically as Uncle Ben handed the boy the musical instrument which his childish credulity believed to be a trumpet.

After a few shrill blasts, he dropped the whistle unceremoniously, and, struggling violently in Jim's arms, excitedly remarked, "'Ant it d'um, 'ant it d'um?'"

Then Vraille set the boy down on the floor beside the drum, and picking up the penny whistle, played a dismal and dolorous tune to his son's accompaniment, while Uncle Ben, not to be outdone, produced a rattle, which he swung round and round as well as his boisterous laughter would allow him.

The boy's delight was unbounded; he hovered between a box of bricks and an india-rubber ball, holding a sword in one hand and a glass marble in the other, quite unable to determine which treasure demanded the greater share of his attention. He was somewhat bewildered with his wealth, and any *woman* of sense would have known that one toy would have amused him more than a dozen. Judith, indeed, did protest mildly against the variety of attractions, saying that it was enough to turn his brain; but Uncle Ben laughed at her fears.

"Not a bit of it," he declared; "let him have the whole blessed lot, and choose what he likes best."

If the boy's joy was a little too ecstatic for his happiness to be absolutely perfect, the pleasure he conferred on his two visitors was unalloyed. With his hands and mind equally full, his eyes wide open, and his legs wide apart, he tottered or tumbled from one

thing to the next, and babbled incessantly about all he saw.

“Lord, how happy he is, and how he talks!” cried Uncle Ben, delightedly. “I can’t understand one half he says,” he continued; “and it seems to me, Mrs. Foresight”—he was always very polite to Judith—“that he learns more in twenty-four hours than I do in a week. I can’t keep up with him.”

“Aye, he’s pretty quick, sir, bless his ‘eart,” said Judith.

“Everything is a lesson to him,” said Jim, picking him up after another “cummle down”; “everything is new and full of interest. It is all future with him, if he only knew it, poor little beggar; but he has no fear, no anxiety; and, in the past, no regrets: he just lives in the absolute present. No wonder he learns quickly. You cannot detect the mark of a pin-prick on a printed page, uncle, but it is pretty apparent on a clean sheet of paper.”

“Just so,” Mr. Vraille replied, his whole attention absorbed in the winding-up of a top.

Vraille watched the noisy top as it banged up against the legs of the chairs and tables, recoiled from one collision on to another, whizzed from danger to danger—doomed, apparently, to self-destruction—escaped with a dent or two, circled, steadied itself, hummed peacefully in a ruck in the carpet, wobbled, received its quietus at the child’s hands, and lay upon its side—dead. Why, his own life had been like that; and now it, too, had settled into a rut. How would it end? But, meanwhile, was it affording the boy gratification? Had he, of late, been neglecting him?

No ; he came to see him whenever he could ; but was that enough ? Was duty alone likely to win the love of that happy little heart ? Had gloomy thoughts excluded others which might have been productive of pleasure in the little fellow's rather dreary life, and in his own, where he had found pleasure so hard to produce ? Was it possible that that busy little mind, so quick to appreciate, so keen to discern, so incapable of reasoning, had recognised a change of manner, and felt, though it could not understand, his selfishness ?

As he sat asking himself these questions, the boy was lashing Uncle Ben's legs with a whip, and chuckling at the old gentleman's contortions of affected fright. Every one, Judith even, was laughing ; he alone was moody and pre-occupied, wishing somehow that his legs, instead of Uncle Ben's, were being lashed.

Master Jim soon tired of the whip, and, espying a glass marble on the floor, evinced as much surprise as if he had seen it for the first instead of the twentieth time that afternoon.

“ Ickle ballee,” he said, holding it in the palm of one chubby hand, while he called Uncle Ben's attention to it with all the fingers of the other. As there was no sort of finality about his own surprise, why should there be about Uncle Ben's ? Apparently there was not. The old gentleman had seen that marble more often than even little Jim himself, yet when it was shown to him again, he evinced as much astonishment as he would have done had Rameses the First suddenly walked into the room.

“ God bless my soul ! ” he exclaimed, giving a great jump, and holding up both hands, palms outward, as

he scrutinised the discovery. "Well, that *is* a marble, and no mistake ; wherever did you find that now ?"

Little Jim looked up at him for a moment with the wondering expression he always wore when questioned, and then said slowly—

"T'umpet, blow t'umpet 'gain"—("Please," from Judith)—"p'ease, Unkoo Ben."

So the old gentleman set to work again on the penny whistle, and blew lustily, until he suddenly exclaimed—

"Why, Jim, we've clean forgot the Ark ! "

This was true. In the excitement of the hour, and amid the general confusion, the Ark, that had given them so much trouble to find, had been overlooked, and still remained "done up" in its brown paper and string.

Its success, when placed in front of the boy, was at once apparent ; he ceased to talk. Silently he sat beside it, picking out the animals one by one until the Ark was empty, and then as silently putting them all back again, not two by two according to tradition, but each one by itself, with the greatest possible care and deliberation. This operation was repeated in solemn silence, but then the recognition of old familiar forms set in with forcible expressions of welcome. All his old friends were there, and he greeted each in turn ; but the recipient of his loudest acclamations of delight was a certain hybrid chanticleer crossed with turkey blood, which he called a "cockey."

The Ark, and especially the cockey, had won the day, and somehow the father of the boy felt glad.

When the time of departure arrived, the cockey was

still clasped to the boy's heart. He watched without a murmur of complaint all the other toys being packed away into a cupboard; he saw the animals stowed into the Ark without a protest; but when they tried to take the cockey from him, he burst into a flood of tears, and, like the dove in the old story, the cock remained outside.

Uncle Ben struggled into his coat again, and after bidding the boy a boisterous farewell, stepped into the passage with a wink of meaning at his nephew.

Jim in his heart thanked him for his forethought, for he had some private business to transact with Judith. It was soon over, and then he said—

“Judith, if I took the boy to live with me down at St. Dogwells, would you come? I tell you fairly it is an infernal hole.”

“Sir,” said the wooden woman, “where he goes, I goes; until I’m told by you I ain’t wanted no more.”

“I shall never be able to repay your devotion, Judith.”

“He pays me ten times over, thank you, sir—to say nothing o’ your kindness.”

“You are a good woman,” he said.

“I hopes so, sir.”

“Look here,” said Uncle Ben, putting his head in at the door, “when you’ve finished with Mrs. Foresight, I want her here a moment.”

“I’ve finished with her now.” He took the child from her arms, bidding her go and see what Mr. Vraille wanted. She left the door ajar as she passed out of the room, but he was practically alone with his son.

There was a yearning look in his eyes as he stroked

the flaxen curls and tried with gentle touch to turn the boy's averted face toward his own. But little Jim was not thinking of him, nor, for the moment, of the wooden bird he clutched so tightly in his hand; his whole attention was concentrated on the door. "Lalla gone," he said anxiously, and with indications of rising tears.

"Never mind her for one little moment, my boy—my own boy. Look at me—so. Now say 'Daddee dear' just once to please me."

"Daddee de-ar," the child repeated slowly.

"He's going away, little chap, right away—don't struggle so, he'll soon be gone. Will you kiss him once before he goes?"

The rosy lips formed themselves into a pout, shyly touched his sallow cheek with their sweet softness, and opened in a gentle kiss.

"My darling boy! we will be all the world to one another from this day forth. We promise it—don't we?"

"Zes," said little Jim, beginning to look very miserable, and with his eyes fixed on the door again. Alas! he knew not what he said.

He knew what he wanted, though. "Lal-la!" he shouted with a wail, and Judith came.

"Oh, sir," she said, "jus' look at this. Mr. Vraille has given it me for gownds, an' won't listen to a word I says."

Vraille caught sight of a fluttering bank-note as he thrust the child into her arms, and with a hasty word of farewell hurried from the room.

He found his uncle in the drawing-room talking to

Mrs. Flight, who had that minute returned home after an apparently successful raid upon the bookstalls, for she sat beside an open parcel of magazines and papers cutting the leaves of a new *Nineteenth Century*. "Oh, I like to read both sides of the question," she was saying, "and this is about the only periodical nowadays that gives him a chance of ventilating his mistaken—Well, Jim, how are you? How's the boy?"

Late as it was, she insisted on their staying for "a cup of tea and a chat," and would listen to no excuses. "It is not often," she said, "that I get the chance of talking to intelligent people—they are so shockingly scarce."

So they sat down and sipped her tea; and Uncle Ben, at least, indulged her to the top of her bent. He and the sprightly little old lady were soon immersed in an argument in which little by little Uncle Ben appeared to get out of his depth. But Jim did not pay much attention to what they were saying; he was thinking of the child upstairs, now probably asleep; thinking how thoroughly contented people with hobbies were, even though they lived alone, and wondering if he too would be happy down at Fort Gaunt if he had something interesting to absorb his whole mind, something that would take him out of himself—the child for instance.

When Mrs. Flight had more or less reconstructed the British Constitution and placed it upon a new and sounder basis, they rose to go. Uncle Ben somewhat hurriedly made his escape from the room, but Jim lingered behind to tell her, with many expressions of gratitude for her past kindness to his boy, that he

thought of transplanting him to St. Dogwells. She received the information with composure, but assured him that the child was no trouble to her, and that she was willing to keep him as long as Jim pleased.

"You have been awfully good to him as it is," he said in conclusion, "and I know you would do what you say, but the fact is, I think I should like to have him."

"And he'd be happier with you than here, that's the truth," she burst out. "I'm a selfish old woman, and don't pretend to care about children, but he'll learn to love you and be a comfort to you perhaps. The least that I could do was to give your child a home. I'd do more—more for you than that, if I knew how. I wished to make you reparation; but I fear reparation is impossible. Look here, Jim; I never mention the subject, because I hate the thought of it, but your marriage ought never to have taken place—she was not worthy of you, Jim; I knew it—not so well then as I do now—but still I knew it, and I behaved badly in allowing you to throw yourself away upon her."

"Don't think that," he said; "it would have made no difference."

"I suppose not," she said, looking up into his face. "Oh! she was a fool—a fool—a fool! I hate a fool. There, I've said my say. Good-bye."

She had meant kindly, and he knew it, but still, as Jim descended the stairs, he could not help feeling that he had no one in the world, except Uncle Ben, to look to for sympathy apart from pity; that his troubles would in time become a nuisance to other people; that his boy was not really wanted, and that in the future

they would have to look to one another for everything.

"Uncle," he said, when he and the old gentleman had walked a little way along the street in silence, "I think I'd better take that boy down to St. Dogwells."

"Perhaps it's right he should go," Uncle Ben replied reflectively, "but his going will leave a hole in my life, already as full of holes as a fishing-net."

It was late when they separated that night after their quiet little dinner at the Albany. They had discussed many things, and Major Vraille, as he walked home to his hotel, had much upon his mind.

"It all has to be done," he said to himself as he stood before his dressing-table winding up his watch, "and it may as well be done at once;" and he began to empty his pockets preparatory to undressing. From one of them he drew out an unopened letter. With a gesture, partly of sudden recollection, partly of impatience, he tore it open.

A glance at its contents assured him that it was from no money-lender. It was a long letter, neatly written on thick black-edged note-paper, and the handwriting was clear and characteristic-looking. Sitting down, he drew a candle towards him and began to read. It bore an address he had never heard of, and commenced in the usual way, "Dear Major Vraille":—

"Perhaps you have quite forgotten my existence. I was quite young when you knew me in England, and since then I have only had the pleasure of meeting you once—in India, a little more than a year ago, at a dinner-party. But my name will at once tell you who I am, and why I am writing to you."

He read thus far with weary indifference, and yawned as he turned over the sheets to find out the name of his unknown correspondent. He was tired and wanted to go to bed, and the rest of the long-winded epistle—a request for a loan, or whatever it was—would then very well wait until the morning. But the signature, when he had found it, made him turn back to the first page again and read on :—

“The settlement of my poor father’s affairs all devolved upon me—indeed, I was almost the only relation he had when he died—and although I have had to do many things that would have been better done by a brother or a son, I cannot help feeling glad that, with the rest, this duty and pleasure of writing to you has fallen to me and to no one else.

“I left India soon after hearing the news of his death, but until I came home (to England, I mean, for this is not my home) no details reached me; and even then I did not know of the great debt of gratitude I owed you. But, some time ago now, I received a sealed packet of letters and papers, which had been travelling about after me from address to address, and then I knew all.”

Vraille here turned the page. The writing was now a little more hurried and the style less precise. It seemed that there lay between the lines the record of a struggle between emotion and propriety :—

“Among those papers I found a long official letter describing an attack on a convoy and the brave action that saved my father’s life. It lies before me as I write, and every word of its cold, official language tells me of your gallantry. Even official language cannot

detract from it, although it seems to try to, by detailing all you did as so many facts without comment or emphasis. But perhaps it is best so; they are facts that speak for themselves; no mere words could improve them, though circumstances might, and did."

Then the writer became very complimentary and slightly incoherent; but Major Vraille understood and blushed. He had never been addressed in quite the same way before.

"Oh, I should like," she said, "to be the man who had done those things! I should be so proud if he were a relation of mine. Some day I hope I may meet him, and give him my thanks personally, instead of writing them in a letter which seems to fall so far short of what I think and all I would wish to say."

She went on to explain that her opportunities of seeing newspapers had not been many of late, and supposed that she had thus missed seeing the notification of his "honours." Her congratulations concluded in the remark, "And please believe me when I say that I am glad to think it was my own father who recommended you for your Victoria Cross. This copy of his letter is unsigned and not in his handwriting, but the heading states that it is from him to the General he was serving under at the time, and I shall keep it all my life, and value it almost as much as if it were the original."

At this point Vraille laid her letter down. How did she get that paper? Had it been put amongst her father's private letters by mistake, or had some one sent it to her purposely? He wished she had never seen it; and yet—well, there was no harm done after

all ; he could easily write and explain. He went on with his reading.

There was very little more—a few commonplaces, and apologies for not having written before, and the letter concluded with—

“ I am living with a country family, far away from Army Lists and military people, and had almost despaired of finding out where you were, when I remembered your having mentioned an uncle, a solicitor, that night at dinner. I managed to get hold of a London Directory, and as there was only one lawyer of the name, am sending this to his address. I should like to know that it has reached you ; it would take a weight off my mind.

“ With kind regards to Mrs. Vraille, believe me,

“ Yours gratefully and sincerely,

“ EDITH DARE.”

CHAPTER II.

ST. DOGWELLS.

St. Dogwells, Vraille had told his uncle, was “not much of a place;” others said it was “rather out of the way;” others again declared that it was “a God-for-saken, poke-in-the-corner hole;” while some described it as “a retired little spot.” Retired it certainly was—three hundred and odd miles from London and twenty-five from the nearest town of consequence, with nothing in itself or its vicinity of sufficient interest to attract tourists, and lying on the sea-coast out of the track of travellers.

The society of the place was also for the most part retired. There was Colonel Taplow, who had retired from the army, and with a dozen other Taplows—one of them his wife—bivouacked in St. Dogwells as best he could on limited supplies and unlimited demands; and Captain Coxhead, who had retired from the navy, rather precipitately, after running his ship into a pier in broad daylight, whereby the Admiralty had been put to a good deal of expense in the way of repair, and the Captain to a good deal of trouble in the way of explanation. Mrs. Bompas had retired from a wharf in the Mediterranean on the death of her consort, the successful coal merchant, choosing St. Dogwells as a retreat because she was distantly connected with the

whole county, and because her education had been neglected at a school in Chatterleigh, the nearest town of importance and her birthplace; reasons which entitled her to "county family" distinction, and gave her a right to feel thoroughly at home. The Colonel of the St. Dogwells Rifles had retired on a fortune amassed in selling other people's property, the commissions on "going, going, gone!" having obtained him a commission in the Volunteers while his hammer was in full swing, a colonelcy afterwards, and the proud position of squire and justice of the peace in the meantime. Mrs. Bompas was distantly connected with the Colonel's wife (the consanguinity of the neighbourhood was phenomenal), and was second only to her in the St. Dogwells gamut of respectability. Other colonels, commandants of militia and yeomanry, struggled annually out of distant retirements into uniform, and reversed the usual order of things by turning the plough-share into the sword. There were a good many spinster ladies who had retired from the vanities of the world on annuities, a few widows from its temptations on pensions, one or two shipbuilders, a lawyer, and an undertaking carpenter, on the profits of their respective trades. St. Dogwells was a retired but by no means a peaceful spot; it was generally in the wildest state of excitement—about nothing.

From all of this it might be supposed that St. Dogwells was an insignificant sort of place. Not at all; it was vastly important, not geographically, commercially or historically important, but important in itself. Importance was its principal feature, its essence, its sheet anchor. It was nothing if not

important, except, perhaps, particular—it was very particular.

Though dignified locally by the appellation town, it was in reality little more than a village; or, to be quite accurate, in the transition stage between the two. For it had shaken off primitive simplicity, and, like a hobbledehoy in his first tail-coat, seemed to be consciously struggling with new-found dignity, and trying to assume an independent air, though feeling somewhat ill at ease; hence, perhaps, its importance. It had its post office, railway station, branch bank, town hall, and other public buildings, but no pier, esplanade or season. It had not even the effrontery to face the open sea, but glanced at it sideways, and smiled or frowned, according to the weather, upon a creek which ran inland at its feet. From its creek it rose up in petty arrogance, disdaining anything like sand or shingle; it was built upon a rock. At the foot of the rock was mud. The rock rose out of the mud, and St. Dogwells out of the rock in amphitheatrical tiers or terraces. Each terrace was a street, and each street was more dilapidated than the one below it. From the upper windows of most of the houses could be seen, a mile or so distant, the grim outlines of Fort Gaunt.

Fort Gaunt stood on the summit of a hill overlooking the sea, and was built in the style of architecture usually affected by penitentiaries and meat-markets. Its "modern type" days were over, but its old armament had recently been replaced by new, which had demanded the attention of a regular garrison in the shape of a battery of artillery.

The prospect of life in quarters in Fort Gaunt held forth attractions to no one but Major Vraille. His captain was a paper man. Young Blythe, his senior subaltern, was supposed to occupy a room in it, but very rarely did, for he was a young gentleman with a soul above St. Dogwells. "It was not good enough," he said, and when unable to get leave, applied to go through a course of instruction that would take him away anywhere out of St. Dogwells. Young Blythe was rather selfish in this respect; but younger Starling, who was a married "man," and lived in the town, did his duty for him uncomplainingly, as a brother-officer should, who in taking unto himself a wife has, *ipse facto*, resigned his right to gad. Fort Gaunt was consequently rather a lonely sort of place to live in; but its field-officers' quarters were good of their kind, and on joining Vraille had determined to occupy them, partly because he had no particular reason for living anywhere else, partly because loneliness was an attraction rather than otherwise.

But this loneliness had brought with it anything but the peace which he had confidently expected would be its necessary consequence. No sooner had he paid a round of duty calls than he was pestered with invitations to "tea" from all sorts and conditions of women, which he was put to the trouble of thinking out plausible reasons for declining, and with invitations to dinner from Mrs. Bompas, who was very civil, which he was put to the trouble of accepting. No one except Mrs. Bompas had asked him to dinner more than once, but every one else seemed to consider him a fair target to pelt with invitations of another kind. He was

invited to subscribe to church steeples, fancy-bazaars, cricket clubs, lifeboats, tea meetings, regattas, races, and, in short, to all sorts of funds, festivities, and charities, by all sorts of societies and individuals. Of most of these applications he took no notice, beyond laughing when they were verbal, and pitching them into his waste-paper basket when they were written ; and in a very little time relations became strained between himself and three or four prominent St. Dogwellites. Friction commenced, and found him callous and indifferent. Callousness and indifference were more than anything else calculated to exasperate St. Dogwells ; and soon, in sheer self-defence, he found himself involved in a complicated paper warfare with a militia colonel, a volunteer captain, a magistrate of the bench, and a minister of the Church of England. He had only wished to be let alone ; but since it seemed that that was a state of existence impossible in St. Dogwells, and his ecclesiastical antagonist had reported him to the War Office for incivility, and the War Office had called on him for an explanation, he took up his pen and fought like a man. It was not difficult to make enemies in St. Dogwells, and James Vraille, with his sense of duty, duty, duty, and his contempt for what he called fraud and fudge and fiddle, went the right way to work to make as many as possible.

These things were irritating, but as nothing compared to the internal strife of the war he was waging with himself. Solitude, he feared, was making him sour ; lack of congenial employment, idle ; introspection, self-conscious and diffident ; thought only led to incredulity, doubt to disbelief, experience to

disillusion, and increased knowledge to a better perception of his own ignorance.

Sometimes, when night after night he had sat alone, reading, thinking, wasting his time, a wild desire for companionship would suddenly seize upon him, and for a time he would feel that he was going mad for the want of some one to talk to. The fit would pass, and leave him more devoted to solitude than ever. For when he looked out upon the world, especially the St. Dogwells world, he was filled with contempt for its ignorance, its insincerity, its "fraud." All this was unhealthy, and he knew it; but although possessed of a constant feeling of slipping downhill—of sinking out of the world's and his own esteem into a useless existence of self-absorbed indolence—he found it well-nigh impossible to shake off his lethargy. He had tried once or twice, and had dosed himself with St. Dogwells gossip until it had made him sick; but the stimulant had done his apathy no good, and such a cure was worse than the disease. And, after all, if he preferred to be as he was, why should he try to be otherwise? He had no one but himself to please; and what possible interest could he be expected to take in a place like St. Dogwells? Why should he try to make himself agreeable to people of the Bompas and Taplow stamp? Their conversation was an insult to his understanding! No; there was not a soul in the place he would cross the road to speak to, though many he would walk a mile to avoid; he would just jog quietly on, doing his work to the best of his ability, and letting the rest slide. But his work was rather monotonous, and he had no one to talk to, as

young Starling had, after it was done. He had jogged on until the quietness of jogging on had become intolerable, and in desperation had packed his portmanteau and gone to London in search of amusement, distraction, dissipation, companionship, the sights and sounds of real life—anything but solitude. The visit had ended, as all such visits did, in disappointment; he had found none of the pleasure he had hoped to find, and had longed for his solitude again. He had come back more discontented with it than ever.

“Shall I never get used to living alone?” he asked himself as his cab rattled over the drawbridge of the fort. “I must, I must.”

But the sound of his footsteps on the stone stairs struck mournfully upon his ear, and the reverberating echoes he awoke in the stone corridors with their white-washed walls reminded him dismally of the emptiness of the rooms he passed on his way to his own—of the emptiness of his existence, the emptiness of hope and effort.

A bright fire burned in his grate; his servant had prepared a little supper for him; the table was spread, and a bottle of claret stood warming on the hearth. The room looked comfortable and cheerful, especially so after the dreariness of his long journey; but it was not home, not so homely as the little house he had visited the day before, where there had been laughter and fun, a desire to please and be pleased, smiles of happiness and contentment, and a prattling tongue to welcome him with “daddee de-ar.” Ah! perhaps that was the reason Fort Gaunt seemed so much more quiet and orderly than usual; it was the recollection of that

little voice that was making all the difference between his quarters and that upper story at Mrs. Flight's.

Major Vraille sat down to his supper in a very discontented frame of mind ; but as discontent does not necessarily allay hunger, he speedily disposed of a couple of mutton chops and half his bottle of claret, and then flung himself into an arm-chair by the fire, and lighted a pipe.

The room was comfortably and even handsomely furnished, yet lacked something that prevented him from thoroughly appreciating its advantages. To all appearances there was nothing left to be desired. He was lounging in a seductively luxurious arm-chair, smoking a pipe of good tobacco ; his slippers feet rested on one of the many rich Cabul rugs which were strewn about the floor ; heavy curtains over the windows and doors protected him from draughts ; on one hand, within reach of his arm, stood a handsome oak book-case well filled with books ; on the other, a pretty little cottage piano, which he could play sufficiently well to amuse himself ; the walls were hung with a number of old engravings, a few oil paintings, and the trophies he had collected on his travels ; while all about were littered newspapers, magazines, carpenter's tools, paint brushes, and a hundred other odds and ends of an artistic, literary or useful nature. And yet, with all these pleasant accessories to comfort and occupation, he was dissatisfied with his lot. These things did not make up home ; they were only the salvage of a wreck that had once been home, most of them mere memories of the past, but all helping to tell the same dull story of the present. Taste and untidiness, utility and art

were oddly blended ; discursive and desultory propensities were suggested in the titles of the books upon the book-shelves, and upon the writing-table were unmistakable signs of method ; indications of talent were not wanting, and a natural love of refinement was everywhere apparent. Nor was this all, for on all sides were the evidences of various sports and games enjoyed at different times in a life of exercise and exertion—and behind the door a broken walking-stick, a symbol of spent effort and utter uselessness.

As he smoked idly and surveyed his surroundings in a tired kind of way, a brindled bull-dog waddled into the room and stood in front of him, looking up in his face and wagging his tail, as well as a tail so full of kinks could be wagged.

“ Hallo, Wilkes, you’re rather late with your greeting, my friend. Where have you been ? ” He leant forward and patted the dog’s head.

Mr. Wilkes received the caress with his eyes closed, his thick neck outstretched, and his ears laid back ; and then, after one or two ungainly efforts to lick the hand that had petted him, sat down solemnly on his haunches, and watched his master’s face with his bullet head a little on one side. Finding that there was little to be gained by watching, he walked away to the centre of the hearthrug, where he turned slowly round two or three times, and sank down heavily upon his stomach with a deep sigh. Resting his great blunt nose upon his fore-paws, he kept a sharp look-out for some time from the corner of his eye, but soon blinked drowsily, and, after a yawn or two, turned upon his side and fell peacefully asleep.

He was an extraordinarily ugly dog even for a bulldog, and not very valuable; for his former owner, whom Vraille had one day discovered on the beach in the act of making fast a large stone to a piece of rope preparatory to taking Mr. Wilkes for a short sea voyage, had been glad to part with him for a sum equivalent to that which the Inland Revenue had peremptorily demanded, and which he had declined to pay. He had been unable to find any one willing to buy the brute, he said, and the gent might have him cheap; but he'd sooner drown him than give him away. Vraille, in making his purchase, discovered that this humane gentleman's name was Wilkes, and called the dog after him as an easy solution of a difficulty. Afterwards, when he noticed that there was a deal of quiet persuasion about Mr. Wilkes's manner, and that he was treated with far more courtesy and deference than fell to the lot of much handsomer dogs, he determined to retain the name as not altogether inappropriate.

Mr. Wilkes was as well known in St. Dogwells as Vraille was, for the pair were almost inseparable, and both had equally bad characters among all respectable St. Dogwellites.

"You're an ugly beast," he said, looking down fondly at him, "but you're faithful."

Mr. Wilkes opened his eyes, but for the rest lay quite still.

"If you were handsome, now, you might take a fancy to some one else, or rather some one else to you, and so leave me."

Wilkes beat his tail upon the floor and moistened his muzzle with his tongue.

"Yes—grim," said Vraille slowly, drawing a letter from his pocket; "grim is what you are—we are; we live in a grim place, Wilkes, in a grim way, and grim is what we have to be, or perhaps we couldn't bear it all."

The dog looked his appreciation of these sentiments as well as he could, and then closed his eyes again. He was Vraille's confidant on many occasions, and heard many strange things. He at least found no fault with his humours, and seemed to encourage with his never-failing attention that specially bad habit of thinking aloud which was growing on Major Vraille.

"Bless me if I know what to say," Jim muttered as he turned over the pages of his letter; "it will not be so easy to answer as I thought . . . 'All devolved upon me'—Poor girl! and I promised him I would be kind to her if I had the chance . . . 'though circumstances might and did.' What does she mean by that now? Is it just a figure of speech, or an intentional hint that she understands?" Then he read on in silence for some time, only muttering, "Yes, very flattering," in one place, and "my own father, 'my own' underlined," in another, until he reached the end, when he exclaimed—"With kind regards to Mrs. ——" Oh! little did she think, when she was taking such pains to write me a *nice letter*, that she could make such a mistake in an ordinary complimentary ending. There is wrong in almost everything. Well, here goes."

He drew a chair up to the writing-table and began to write. Presently he stopped, drew his pen through what he had written, and started afresh. "Oh, I'm too tired to think it out to-night," he said at last, tearing

up his papers after two or three unsuccessful attempts to make even a rough draft of his letter ; "I must go to bed now and do it to-morrow. Come along, Wilkes."

The morrow brightened up St. Dogwells considerably. It was a fine day, and Mrs. Bompas determined to pay Mrs. Starling a visit.

There were many reasons for Mrs. Bompas liking this little woman. Mrs. Starling lived in lodgings ; she was poor, and dressed quite plainly. Most of the people about (except the "common people," who seemed to like her) said she was stuck-up, and by asking her to dinner every now and again, and visiting her constantly, Mrs. Bompas was afforded capital opportunities of showing independence, hospitality, and patronage, all of which her soul loved ; and as Mrs. Starling never gave herself airs, stood in no sort of relationship to her, and, more than all, would listen quietly and sympathetically to all she had to say, Mrs. Bompas liked her exceedingly.

It is a pity that so much civility and condescension had not been bestowed upon a more appreciative nature, for, truth to tell, Cicely Starling never seemed to be overwhelmed by the honour of Mrs. Bompas's marked attention, nor did she show in her manner any sense of labouring under an obligation, in spite of her poverty, but treated the good lady as quite a matter of course, no whit superior or inferior to herself. This calm behaviour rather disconcerted Mrs. Bompas sometimes, but from the first she had continued to call regularly, while other St. Dogwellites, when they had

discovered all they could about the Starlings, ceased to trouble them much with visits; so that it was not long before little Cicely Starling began to feel the pricks of the thorns that retirement hides among its roses.

"I wish, Tom," she said to her boy-husband one day when Mrs. Taplow had been turning up her nose at her—"as if I were rancid butter," as she had expressed it—"I do wish, Tom, you had been ordered to the Fiji Islands, where the savages are real. I thought country retirement would be charming, but I had not counted on country cackle and country bumpituousness."

"Come, come, Cis," said Tom, "you must not make the worst of things. You would hate the Fiji Islanders after you had been quartered there a week, and this is not a bad billet from a pocket point of view."

"No one to speak to except Mrs. Bompas! and she bores me into fits with her clothes and her love affairs; and the worst of it is that when *she* comes there's no knowing when she'll go away again—half an hour for her last frock, an hour for all she has been doing since I saw her last, five-and-twenty minutes to run down her friends, and, to make up the usual two hours, the odd five minutes are usually devoted to *me* and my affairs—that's not exactly the sort of person one can talk *to*, you know."

"Everything, I suppose," said Tom, thoughtfully, "seems strange at first to cockneys in the country; and I must confess that, so far, I cannot make these people out. They are not easy to understand, and I expect they want knowing to find out their worth."

"Worth!" cried Cicely; "they are not worth two-pence, the whole lot of them."

"They are retired," laughed Tom.

"They are worse," said Cicely; "they are vulgar."

This was all before Major Vraille had assumed command at Fort Gaunt; and when Tom learnt that he was coming, he had expected great changes. But the changes introduced by his new major were all reserved for Mr. Blythe. Of Tom Starling Major Vraille took little notice, but so much of young Blythe, that that young gentleman was furiously indignant, and said he had never been spoken to in the same way before in his whole service, and would not stand it. But he had to stand it, and a good deal more, until he ultimately went away for the benefit of his professional education. Meanwhile Cicely had found an occupation that made her totally independent of Mrs. Bompas and St. Dogwells, and gave her pleasure from morning until night; indeed, her mind was so fully occupied that even Tom himself sometimes felt neglected.

"I don't hear you complain of having no one to talk to now, Cis," he said one evening when they happened to be talking of Mrs. Bompas again.

"I don't seem to care so much now," said Cicely.

"No, you appear to have all you want—even without me; and I am left worse off than ever."

"No, no, Tom, don't say that; you are always first, but, you see, you don't want perpetual *attention*—that is what makes the difference."

"Don't I? I want as much attention as ever I did, only I get less—that is what makes the difference."

For the next few minutes Tom was the subject of

exclusive and individual attention ; and then Cicely, when her lips were free to speak, said—

“A man, of course, cannot be expected to find interest in anything for long except in another man. It is a pity Mr. Blythe is always away.”

“And precious little use he is to me when he is here—grumbling, scheming to get leave, and perpetually in hot water with Vraille.”

“You certainly are unlucky, poor old Tom ; a nice man for your major would at least have been something.”

“I don’t know what you mean by nice exactly ; he is not nasty—to me at any rate—though he lets Blythe have it pretty hot sometimes ; but Dismal Jimmy is hardly what you would call a conversationalist.” In this irreverent way Tom Starling alluded to his commanding officer. It was a nickname conferred on him by young Blythe, and had superseded all others, to wit—Ursa Major, the Polar Bear (a very happy improvement), Diogenes, Old Fireworks, and others, each of which had had their day, and alluded to some characteristic trait or physical peculiarity discovered in Major Vraille by young Blythe.

“Mrs. Twattle says that every one says that Mrs. Bompas says that Major Vraille is dying of love for her,” laughed Cicely.

“I don’t believe a word of it,” said Tom, indignantly. “He may be everything that is said of him, but he is not a fool.”

“I don’t believe it much either ; but she has promised to tell me all about him some day.”

Now, if Mrs. Bompas had known that the Starlings were accustomed to talk of her in this way, perhaps

she would have postponed the visit she intended paying Cicely that fine day following Major Vraille's return. But she did not know, so she sallied forth from the portals of Golden Hill, and as it was only a step, walked to the lodging-house known in St. Dogwells as Guildhall Villa where the Starlings had made their nest.

Her mode of procedure was characteristic. She waddled into Cicely's drawing-room, blushing like a beetroot (as Cicely afterwards told Tom), simperingingly made her salutations, and plumped down a basket of hot-house flowers on a table.

Although Mrs. Bompas did not say a word about them, Cicely knew from experience that the flowers were in all human probability meant as a present for herself, and began to praise their beauty and fragrance, saying how delightful it was to see flowers in winter-time; and as this called forth the remark, "I just picked a few of the best, thinking you might like them, but they were hardly worth bringing," Cicely was enabled to render thanks as well as praise. But she also knew from experience that the flowers alone had not brought Mrs. Bompas, and she wondered whether it were another ring or a new brooch or a contemplated tea-gown to which she was indebted for the present visit. Oh! of course—a fresh supply of ostrich feathers, the result of a large order on the wandering Jews of the Mediterranean.

When the ostrich feathers had been done full justice to in the way of comment, Mrs. Bompas proceeded to expatiate on the delights of life in Malta, a subject that was never far from her thoughts; and then she

compared the society of the island to that of St. Dogwells, very much to the disadvantage of the latter. Gradually losing all the embarrassment that had marked her manner on arrival in the excitement of discussing her neighbours, she threw off her "real sable" mantle, and became thoroughly confidential and complaisant.

"Pouff!" she said, talking of the Coxheads, "who are they, I should like to know, giving themselves such airs? and as poor as church-mice! Don't you have anything to do with them; they don't like Mr. Starling, I fancy, and might be rude."

"It is they who don't have anything to do with us," said Cicely.

"No; and they won't!"

Mrs. Bompas knew the cause of the Coxheads' dislike of Mr. Starling, though she refrained from mentioning it. Tom's unpopularity was simply due to the fact that he formed part of a system which tolerated such men as Vraille, and such dogs as Mr. Wilkes; Major Vraille having once told Captain Coxhead to mind his own business, while Mr. Wilkes had made a large hole in that indignant gentleman's trousers when he paid Fort Gaunt a visit for the purpose of demanding an apology. As often happens in communities more or less important than that of St. Dogwells, Tom Starling acquired discredit at second-hand; and Mrs. Bompas herself did not like him nearly so much as she did his wife; he had a cold way of looking at her that effectually dammed her little flows of soul, and made her feel that she had nothing particular to say.

She dropped the subject, and the Taplows were next passed in review. How *did* they manage to live? Such a family!

Cicely's remark, that their first-born should have been named Gad, to signify a troop was coming, led up naturally enough to ecclesiastical matters, and Mrs. Bompas wondered—she was always wondering—whether the youngest Mr. Little really would marry the eldest Miss Brand, seeing what enemies their parents were, at least so far as their fathers were concerned.

This unfortunately was true. Mr. Little and Mr. Brand were not the best of friends; every one knew that; and St. Dogwells was more or less divided against itself into the two parishes which they represented, their parishioners following the lead of their spiritual guides, and rallying round the standards High and Low. Mr. Brand was Low, severe, uncompromising in promising a hell of the hottest to the wandering sheep of his bucolic flock; while Mr. Little was High, strictly rubrical, and advanced in his notions about candles and collection-bags.

Here Mrs. Bompas was a fund of information. Had Mrs. Starling not heard that Mr. Brand had refused to bury a child of one of the men up at the Fort, because it had died before being christened, and that Major Vraillé had taken up the father's cause? Oh, yes, every one was talking about it; there had been a "tremendous row," and Major Vraillé had written to the Bishop. Mr. Little had eventually buried the child, but the Major and the High Churchman were not friends either—oh dear no; she had herself heard him refuse Mr. Little point blank to subscribe a penny

towards building a new vestry at the bottom of the church so that the choir might march in procession up the aisle to the chancel, instead of coming in from behind the organ.

She then speculated on the chances of the butcher buying one of her cows, until all the fun was knocked out of Cicely, and her head ached with the strain of keeping her attention at politeness' pitch.

"I have given Miss Meek warning," said Mrs. Bompas, mention of her cow having brought the focus of her mind to bear on domestic matters; "she does not suit me at all; and my maid Harriet tells me she has no control over the children—worse than that, has been telling them lies. Really, governesses are harder to suit oneself with than servants!"

" You are certainly unfortunate," said Cicely; "Miss Meek is the fourth, is she not, you've had since we've been here?"

" Yes, very unfortunate," Mrs. Bompas replied, gloomily; "they either tell lies, or are ignorant, or stupid, or don't know their place, or something. I have my suspicions, do you know, that Miss Meek drinks. Harriet says so, and really I have myself noticed something queer about her at times. But I have decided not to have a governess at all for the future; I am going to try a sort of companion, you know—a lady by birth, if possible, who can teach the children, and sit at table, and in the drawing-room, and that sort of thing—not a common sort of person exactly. I think I have heard of one who will suit—the daughter of an army man who was killed in the Crimea or the Mutiny or somewhere—I forget the name of the place, though

it was mentioned in the letter I had about her. If her references are good, I think I shall take her on trial."

Cicely did not answer. Often had she pitied this wicked Miss Meek; often had Tom violently declared that he would sooner see a sister of his in her coffin than see her governess at Golden Hill.

Mrs. Bompas did not pursue the subject, but presently changed it for one nearer her heart, so to speak. "Oh, of course I like him in a way," she said, "but it is a pity he is so poor, and had to sell that beautiful horse he bought, when they tell me he rode splendidly the two or three times he went out with the hounds. I expect, poor fellow, he was crossed in love when he was younger. It is quite a kindness to ask him out, and he seems to like coming to Golden Hill, though he will go nowhere else. He came back yesterday, I think you said?"

It was strange that she should seem interested in Major Vraillé's movements, when, as a rule, she piqued herself upon the disdain with which she treated the opposite sex. She even went further, and was speculating on the possibilities of his being a widower, when Tom came into the room, and she promptly took her departure, for Mrs. Bompas had no particular liking for Mr. Starling.

From that day forward, she pervaded, to use Cicely's expression, Guildhall Villa, and, as time went on, became more and more confidential. Little by little she revealed to Cicely the inmost workings of her heart with a zest that spoke well for her own candour and Cicely's powers of endurance. Before confiding them, however, she would always extract a promise of

profound secrecy, which Cicely gave, and broke in every particular when she next saw Tom. The complacent widow rarely talked about any one but herself, and took it for granted that St. Dogwells in general discussed nothing but Mrs. Bompas, hence the importance of secrecy ; “For it would never do,” she said, “to have these things known in the town.”

Poor deluded creature ! There was not a shop-keeper or servant in the place who did not pretend to know more of the ins and outs of Golden Hill affairs than its mistress knew herself. Had not Cicely been told over and over again how Alfred the footman—called by the townsfolk Alfred Bompas—and Harriet the maid ruled their mistress with a rod of iron, managed her household, sold the produce of her poultry-yard under her very nose, and kept open house whenever she was away ? Did not Cicely know full well that Alfred and Harriet had often declared that no governess should stay at Golden Hill if *they* were expected to wait upon her ? As Mrs. Starling listened to the self-satisfied widow’s vapourings, she felt quite sorry for her, and disgusted with herself for having acquired such a fund of spiteful tittle-tattle. Should she tell her outright what people said of her—that the lawyer’s wife declared she was afraid of her own footman ; that the doctor’s wife laughed at her for running after Major Vraille without being able to catch him ; that the shop-people giggled when her prune silk swept past their doors ; that the local dressmaker, whom she had snubbed one day, was in the habit of making remarks about the difficulty of fitting such a figure as Mrs. Bompas’s, which were repeated

as the best jokes in St. Dogwells, that same dressmaker having a tongue as sharp as her needle ? But no ; it was no business of hers. Mrs. Bompas knew as much, it seemed, about other people as other people knew about Mrs. Bompas, and so long as she did not pry into the little sacred secrets of Guildhall Villa, which she always seemed far too absorbed in herself to wish to do, Cicely did not care. But she could not help feeling a certain amount of interest in the attentions Major Vraille was apparently paying the good lady, and which, Mrs. Bompas said, were becoming more apparent every day. This was strange, because Tom declared that the Major had not spoken to Mrs. Bompas half-a-dozen times in his life ; and what could an unsociable old bachelor like "dismal Jimmy" see to admire in a widow who cast a large shadow, dressed and talked as Mrs. Bompas dressed and talked, was the mother of such children as Algernon and Gwendoline, and whose manner to men was systematically rude ? It was her money perhaps ! But Mrs. Bompas was quite aware of the attraction that existed in the fortune left her by the late lamented coal-heaver, as Cicely called him, and for that very reason kept men at a distance.

"I'm not going to have them fooling round Golden Hill any more than I like," she said ; "and I can soon let them know when they are not wanted."

And yet she took the keenest interest in the after movements of any who had honoured her house with a visit, and if they by chance wrote to her, their letters were preserved with the greatest care. Many of them she had read aloud to Cicely, her whole countenance beaming with what looked like pleasure, but was of course

nothing but indignation. One unfortunate had been driven to the verge of desperation, and hinted at self-destruction. The sarcasm of the passage was lost upon Mrs. Bompas, who pitilessly exclaimed, "Pouff! let him get over it!"

But the few notes Major Vraille had written her were just now of paramount importance. After much reading between the apparently commonplace lines, they turned out to be the most insidious epistles ever penned by man to woman. And then the old story was all gone over again—his calls, his acceptances of invitations to her house, his glances and meaning speeches.

"I know what he wants well enough," said Mrs. Bompas, reddening and looking supremely happy, "and the whole place is abusing me for the way I treat him; but, bless you, *I* don't care what people say. By-the-way, what does your husband think of it all?"

Cicely inferred that Tom troubled his head little about such things.

"Oh, but they get talking together, I'll be bound," said Mrs. Bompas rather disappointedly. "I gave him a bit of a snub the other day," she went on, "and have not seen him since. He asked me if I thought him weak-minded. I drew myself up stiffly—just as I am doing now—and said calmly, as calmly every bit as I am speaking to you at the present minute, that I thought he was. You *should* have seen his face; he turned perfectly scarlet. Now didn't that serve him out well?"

"But why did you want to serve him out at all?" asked Cicely.

"Oh, just to let him see that I was my own mistress, and was not going to put up with any nonsense. If you are the least bit civil to a man, he at once thinks you are dying of love for him. Of course he would give his ears . . . (and she nodded her head mysteriously); but I'm in no hurry, especially for a man that has nothing to live on beside his pay."

"She has talked herself into the belief," Cicely said afterwards to Tom, "that she is the most fascinating woman in St. Dogwells and the catch of the place."

"So she is," laughed Tom.

In the course of a very few months, Major Vraille, partly by quick resentment of interference, partly by acts of common courtesy, had spun a tangled web about himself which threatened to embarrass him none the less for his being wholly unconscious of its existence; and the threads of affection in it were perhaps likely to prove just as troublesome as those of distrust and dislike. Moreover, there had always been a mystery about him which St. Dogwells had resented as beyond its understanding.

Simple-minded St. Dogwellites! Little did they dream that the Major Vraille whose secluded habits filled their little minds with wonder and speculation, had a surprise in store for them which, far from clearing up this mystery, was calculated to render it somewhat more incomprehensible than ever.

Tom Starling was the first to suspect its advent.

"I think Vraille is going to have some one down to stay with him," he said to Cicely. "He is furnishing some more rooms in the fort, and getting in a whole lot of things, too."

Rumours as to the nature of the orders that Major Vraille was giving in the town, excited the curiosity of St. Dogwells for a day or two, but not a hint was heard about the expected visitor himself. St. Dogwells was not left long in doubt. The Major made his arrangements quietly but speedily, and the reason for them was explained sooner than was expected.

Mrs. Bompas came tearing down to Guildhall Villa, her face in a flame, her bosom in a flutter, and her breath rather short.

"Who *do* you think came down by train from London last night and were met by Major Vraille?" she asked.

Cicely could not guess.

"A woman and a baby!"

CHAPTER III.

LITTLE JIM.

As James Vraille gazed into his child's large eyes, and saw his image reflected in the calm, clear depths of their passive blue, it seemed to him that he was standing at the fountain of life, and that his thirsty soul was drinking in its waters. A few days had sufficed to tell him that a fresh vitality was quickening his pulses, bracing up his muscles, filling him with new energy, new hope, new interests. The childish voice touched chords in his heart that had too long been silent, and made them vibrate with thrills of unmixed pleasure; the childish tongue reminded him of truths he had well-nigh forgotten; and in the childish face he could read lessons which all his books had failed to teach. Even the childish nature was infectious, and he himself felt younger; he, too, began to look with interest on common things; he, too, in very sympathy, found himself wondering and speculating and admiring, losing in great sense the *trouble* of thought, its perplexity and anxiety, and regarding it as a mental pleasure instead of a mental exercise. Already some of the sadness was departing out of life, some of its joy returning.

He sat in his comfortable arm-chair, with a book upon his knee and a pipe in his mouth, thinking. It

was late, and the fort was silent—as silent as it had ever been at that time of night. But the stone corridors had rung with sounds of laughter all the day, and the room in which he was sitting had been full of noise. The echoes of a small, glad voice seemed to hang about it still, and upon a sofa opposite him stood a large unpainted ark. Mr. Wilkes lay snoring at his feet, grim as usual; but even Mr. Wilkes had come in for a small share of the recent gaiety, and for a very large share of admiration.

Vraille was not reading, but on the page before him was a scored passage which ran—"Infancy presents body and spirit in unity: the body is all animation." On the book-shelves beside him were many books, and all of them bore pencil-marks upon their pages—paragraphs marginally noted, sentences underlined, chapters and headings dated. In this way he had been endeavouring to discipline his mind and add to his small store of knowledge. In thought he had hoped to find contentment, through knowledge to acquire peace. He had found plenty of food for reflection in his marked passages—there were hundreds of them, all pregnant with thought; but what contentment could they bring?—"Solitude is impracticable, and society fatal;" "Coop up most men and you undo them;" "For the deadliest of all wet blankets give me a middle-aged man who has been most of a visionary in his youth;" "When the world has once begun to use us ill, it afterwards continues the same treatment with less scruple or ceremony;" "Isolation is the sum-total of wretchedness to man." His reading did not lead to much, and as for his

knowledge, the more he read, the more certain he became that it was simply infinitesimal. This certainty was not conducive to peace, but to conflicting emotions, doubt, fear, hopeless resolutions—anything but peace.

But latterly a new train of thought had arisen. He was studying a philosophy of pure faith, inculcated by a mind that doubted nothing, feared nothing, disbelieved in nothing, and he began to find and mark other passages in his books, such as—"Every failure is a step to success;" "Perfect ignorance is quiet, perfect knowledge is quiet; not so the transition from the former to the latter;" "Whatever is the subject of faith should not be submitted to reason;" "How infinitely graceful children are before they learn to dance;" "Great thoughts come from the heart;" and one other, too well remembered to be read again, too familiar to be marked that it might not be forgotten, "Of such is the Kingdom of Heaven."

With the fresh turn given to his thoughts, his feelings had all altered, and soon he recognised that he himself had undergone a change, and, within a comparatively short space of time, had become another and a happier man. But the causes that had brought about this change in himself were not those that could in any way influence a child, and little Jim's affections, inclinations, disposition, must, he felt, for some time to come, remain the same. He was but a child—an ignorant, simple little child, without the power to reason, without recollection even, with no sense of duty, no emotions springing from the knowledge of obligation, for he had no such knowledge; the ties of

relationship were as nothing to him, and he could not love simply because he should. But he loved Judith. His whole heart and soul—which with him meant his whole selfishness—was wrapped up in Judith; she was necessary to his comfort, his amusement, and, consequently, his happiness. There were, then, other influences by which he could be won, and very powerful ones, apparently. Thus Major Vraille, arguing it out in his man's mind, came to the conclusion that the child's love had to be won gradually by patience and perseverance; and by making himself useful, necessary to him, he hoped in time to find his way into his heart, as Judith had already done. So he set about wooing the boy with all his accustomed earnestness, and with something beside that made his task a pleasure.

Sometimes he thought that he was making rapid progress, at others that a stern look, a quick word, an unmeant asperity of manner, had lost him much of the ground he had before made good. He could not tell; the boy's demeanour was no certain index of his own success or failure; it was never the same for long, and from its numberless fluctuations he found it impossible to strike a mean. Once, when he held out his arms to the boy and he did not come, but stood looking at him wistfully, he said to Judith—

“He seems rather frightened of me still; but I suppose he'll get over that in time.”

“Bless his honest little heart,” she replied, with the usual aspirates missing, “till now he's never had but half a chance o' knowin' ye; an' he's not frightened, sir, but only a bit shy. He's ready enough to love any one that's kind to him, let alone you, sir, who's

allus been so good ; an' he's that affectionate and thoughtful-like, you'd never guess, only seein' him sometimes. His thoughtfulness made him a bit backward with his speech, p'r'aps, but now he can say pretty near anythink he likes, an' he'll be talkin' to yer nineteen to the dozen soon."

This was a long speech for Judith, but he listened to every word of it attentively.

"I want him to get to like me," he said ; "but, Judith, I don't want him, for that reason, ever to like you a bit the less."

She smiled.

"It'll all come," she said ; "all in different ways."

He hardly understood ; how should he ? What should a glum major know about nurses and children ? What reason had he to hope that he could insinuate his gaunt image into the boy's heart ? And, come to that, as St. Dogwells very justly remarked, what right had he to bring a child to Fort Gaunt at all ? At best, playing with a baby was but a sorry occupation for a *man*—and such a man !

But he neither knew, nor cared to know, what St. Dogwells thought ; his quarters were his own, to do what he liked with ; and if a set of miserably ignorant people had been too busy with their own "endless chatter and blast" to hear the social news of the world outside their back-of-the-earth corner, that was no fault of his. It never occurred to him that all his movements were the subject of criticism in St. Dogwells, still less that St. Dogwells' curiosity would extend to the direct catechism of Judith. But such appeared to be the case.

"I takes natural-like to barricks, sir," she said to him one day a few weeks after her arrival ; "an' I'd jus' as soon live in a fort as anywhere else. But what business is that of anybody's but mine and yours, sir ?"

"Why, who has been interfering with you ?" asked Jim, indignantly.

"All sorts," Judith replied ; "they seems to think nothing o' stoppin' yer in the street under pretence o' speakin' to the baby, and arskin' all manner o' questions, such as they didn't oughter ask."

There was something in her manner which betrayed an uneasiness of conscience and a desire to unburden her mind ; and Mrs. Foresight never addressed him of her own accord without good cause. He shrank from inquiring into the nature of the questions that had been put to her, and somehow guessed that she did not wish him to ask.

"The people here are inclined to be impertinent," he said ; "but you must not mind that. If they wish to know anything about *me*, I have nothing to conceal."

"It's jus' this ways, sir, beggin' yer pardon ; they are bent on findin' out every bit they can about yer, an' they don't mind lettin' me understand they want to. If yer was ter kill me for it, I couldn't tell a lie ; but, with yer permission, I could give some of these folk a bit o' my mind, an' tell 'em things they p'raps *don't* want to know."

He knew she spoke the truth, absolutely ; he knew that hers was a nature that could not quibble, much less lie ; he knew that he could trust her as he would trust himself ; and he knew, too, that she possessed a

marvellous control over her tongue, and that gossip was a thing unknown to her ; but he had never before so fully appreciated the false position in which they both were placed.

“ Judith,” he said, solemnly, “ I have good reason to trust you implicitly. You have my whole confidence. Do as seems to you best, and it will be right. I neither wish you to lie, nor even to prevaricate. In a little while anything there is to know will be placarded before the eyes of the world, and I care absolutely nothing what these people think or say. You are at perfect liberty to tell them anything you think fit. But there is another thing that I do care about—are you yourself satisfied? Shall I take a house in the town for you and little Jim ? ”

“ As you please, sir ; but not on my account. Me and Master Jim wants no company, especially of the sort we’re likely to find down town among that there cacklin’ lot, an’ I think we’re a good bit comfortabler where we be.”

She was satisfied, and quite happy in her mind again, for she knew what to do when she next met with anxious inquiries about Mrs. Vraille.

“ No,” she said to Mrs. Taplow, who happened to meet her soon afterwards, and began to ply her with questions in an off-hand way,—“ no ; Mrs. Vraille is *not* coming to St. Dogwells, ma’am ; and Mrs. Vraille is *not* dead that I knows of ; and Major Vraille is *not* the sort of gentleman that minds folk pokin’ and pryin’ into his affairs, as p’r’aps Colonel Taplow would if the Major poked and pried into his, which, *being* a gentleman, he has no thoughts o’ doin’.”—“ No,” she said to

Mrs. Bompas's maid, the gaudy Harriet, turning on her like a tigress, "you may go and tell yer mistress, who sent yer, that he has *no* other children, that this boy is his only one, and that his name's James Vraille like his father's, and not Bompas, thank 'eaven!—not nothin' whatsoever to do with Bompas; and that *my* name's Judith Foresight, and that hif she wants to know any more, she can jus' come to me herself, instead o' sending her scullery-maid dressed up in her clothes."

In like manner she answered all inquiries and questions, making not a few enemies in the cause of truth, and hardly adding to her master's popularity.

There was one lady in the town, however, who had once or twice stopped to speak to her and admire her charge without asking any impertinent questions. Judith spoke of her alone as a lady—all the rest were women.

Cicely Starling had no need and no desire to cross-question any one; she knew the secret of little Jim's history, and she was sorry.

"Oh, Tom," she said, "I can never like that horrid Mr. Blythe again for having written you such an unkind letter about Major Vraille's misfortune. I can see nothing to laugh at in a woman running away from her husband, and leaving behind a poor little innocent child; and such a dear little fellow, too! I feel sure that Major Vraille was not a bit to blame; I believe he is a good man, for he seems devoted to the boy, and he's never been anything but nice to us."

"No, never," Tom admitted.

"I like him," said Cicely, decidedly; "and some day I'll be kind to him."

She had heard many disparaging accounts of his habits, disposition, temper, but she could not remember having ever heard anything to his credit, even from Mrs. Bompas, who only estimated merit in other people by the amount of interest they showed in herself. She knew from personal experience that he had a shy, diffident manner, and was not easy to talk to ; and even Tom, the easy-going Tom, admitted that he was “a rum sort of chap ;” while Mr. Blythe had often declared him to be “a rude brute.” Yet, in spite of all these things, Cicely Starling was guided by her womanly instinct into the belief that, at heart, Major Vraille was not a bad man. And why ? Simply because, when she stopped to speak to little Jim in the street—as she stopped to speak to every child in the place—the boy had always a whip, or a top, or a gun in his hand, which he explained to her had been given him by “daddee.” This daddee, she illogically argued, must in consequence be a good man at heart.

She had taken a fancy, too, both to the boy and to Judith. She had a child of her own, and that fact alone invested every child she met with interest ; but there was a certain dignity of demeanour and air of refinement about little Jim which was specially attractive, and told her at once that he was a little gentleman.

“He’s a charming little fellow,” she once said to Judith ; “and I expect you and Major Vraille are very proud of him. *I* should be if he were mine ; I never met a boy with nicer little manners.”

The wrinkles seemed to disappear out of Judith’s hard face as it relaxed into something like a smile.

"The Major's somethin' more'n proud of him, Mrs. Starling, ma'am," she said. "He thinks a'most o' nothin' else, I do believe."

Mrs. Foresight knew, if any one did, that James Vraille was fond of the boy, but even she did not know all.

Who beside himself could analyse the feelings that had prompted what Judith called his "lovin'-kindness," and Cicely his "devotion"? Who beside himself knew of the void that had seemed to exist in his heart for years past? Who but he could tell that the child's companionship was tending to fill that void, and that his bright young presence was creating a new and almost happy life for him out of his recent loneliness?

He was grateful for these things, and perhaps gratitude was one of his reasons for wishing to make the boy's surroundings as cheerful and pleasant as possible. But, apart from that, there was the remembrance of his own childhood, and the thought that he held this child's future in the hollow of his hand. It was a solemn thought, a grave responsibility. He wished him to be happier than he himself had been, and he believed that his future happiness would in great measure depend upon his present training. He could not change his temperament, whatever it might turn out to be, but he could control or encourage, as seemed desirable, his tastes and disposition; he could direct his thoughts, educate his mind, and, to a certain extent, regulate his actions. He could, above all, show him the consequences of folly and ignorance, those chief mainsprings of evil, and so guard him against an immense amount of harm.

The father was almost as simple as the son. No doubt he could do all he promised himself he would do, but he quite forgot that he could never impart the knowledge he himself had learnt from experience, and that experience was the only task-mistress capable of teaching little Jim life's sternest and most useful lessons. With this radical error in his calculations how could he ever hope to work his sum out anything like right? What would all his metaphysical analysis benefit him in his endeavours to gain his child's affection? Were his anxious thoughts likely to tend to the boy's happiness? No. Many of his hopes were doomed to disappointment, and his theories, when they came to be put to the practical test, were pretty sure to fail. And yet, in spite of mistakes, in spite of want of knowledge in such matters, his perseverance met with its reward, and a something that was founded on no system, guided by no principle, led him on gradually to success. Little Jim began to express a desire to be with big Jim, and big Jim felt gratified and recompensed.

Soon an exceedingly good understanding was arrived at between them, and principally through the agency of Vraille's uniform. When Vraille was in uniform, his son regarded him with awe and admiration. The "jolly soldiers" whom Judith had so often shown him in his picture-books had always possessed a great attraction for him; but now that for the first time in his life he had an opportunity of seeing them in the flesh, he was fairly fascinated. He loyed them all, but was drawn especially to that particular one whom he could minutely inspect and even handle. His fingers

clutched the buttons of Vraille's tunic one by one, and each filled him with fresh admiration.

"Pitty buttut," he said, beginning at the top ; "'nother pitty buttut ; and '*nother pitty buttut*'—and so on all the way down. Nothing escaped his notice, from the "money" which he was surprised to find his father wore upon his breast, to the "prickey tings" that stuck out from his heels. And then there was the bright "*yearl hord!*" The sight of that "real sword" never seemed to pall, and Vraille often put it on when there was no better reason for doing so than that the child might hear it clank. It was that sword which coloured the greater part of little Jim's conversation, and implanted in his heart his first ambition. "*Me going be a 'olly 'olear thum day, 'ike daddee, an' have a yearl hord,*" was his constant remark.

"My boy," said Jim, on one blissful occasion, "I'm not a particularly *jolly* soldier that I know of, but we'll see if we can make you into one."

So he bought the boy a sword straightway, and gave an old jacket and forage-cap to Judith, who cut them down—cut them nearly all away, in fact—and little Jim was dressed up in what he called "*yearl 'olly 'olear cloze.*" He had never been more completely satisfied in his life, and he was puffed up with pride to such an extent that he could barely speak. But when not dressed in "*'olly 'olear cloze,*" he could, as Judith had declared, say almost anything, though what he said was not always easy to understand. His language was sadly deficient in pronouns, *me* doing duty for a great many others, and his sibilants and dentals gave him a good deal of trouble. Vraille

consequently, had some difficulty at first in construing such a sentence as, "Me going take boy 'iding wizzoo, daddee? Yes. Thum day. In me poneeancart —hink." But soon he began to understand, and the better he did so, the more he wondered. The "hink" that concluded so many of the boy's remarks meant "think," and was always spoken in a tone of deep meditation and speculative assurance combined that was absurdly comic coming from a dot of humanity who knew nothing and had no right to form any sort of opinion; yet Vraille sometimes fancied that in this "hink" might lie the touchstone of the boy's character; and as he looked at the pensive little face and wondered if it were so, his first feeling of amusement would subside gradually into one of gravity. The pony and cart had only been promised; but a promise, to him, was a fulfilment. The vehicle already existed, not in his imagination, but in his absolute belief, somewhere close at hand, ready for him to get into at a moment's notice.

"Never," said Vraille, in answer to his remark, "will I break a promise once made to you, my boy: it would shake that infinite faith of yours, and ruin it."

Mr. Wilkes was an attraction hardly less powerful than Vraille's uniform. The "goggie" afforded Master Jim infinite amusement and delight. He pulled his ears and tail, he trod on his toes, he poked his fingers into his eyes and mouth, he worried him and petted him, he tried to carry him, and lay down on the floor beside him, talking to him. He told him all he had been doing, and asked him questions in return; he never left him in peace for two minutes at

a time, while he was in the room with him. In short, he led him on all occasions, without scruple or compunction, a dog's life; and Mr. Wilkes, the terror of the neighbourhood, far from resenting such treatment, seemed rather to like it. The dog was hideous to behold, the boy was very nearly a cherub; but, if ever true sympathy existed, it existed between the pair. No matter how his ears were twisted, Mr. Wilkes never so much as winked his eye; no matter how awkwardly he might waddle about the room, knocking up against things and occasionally upsetting them, he never touched the child; and a wag of his tail would have been almost enough to knock him down. Mr. Wilkes was a very generous dog, little Jim a very fearless child.

Vraille, with a daily, and almost hourly, increasing pleasure, noticed all these things, and many more; and as he began to know his son better, he began to think (unlike most parents) that the boy was a prodigy: he was so amusing, so attractive, so fearless, so quaint, so observant, so shrewd in his remarks, so utterly guileless, sometimes so frightfully naughty, and always so woefully repentant afterwards. "Me been a orful orty boy," he would explain when his eyes were rather red and puffy; "me 'ood boy now; me 'orry, daddee; daddee not 'ip boy—hink."

"No, I could not; I simply could not whip you, Jim—unless you were to tell a lie; then I think I would. But you mustn't be a naughty boy."

"No—not be orty boy 'gain."

"That's right," the elder Jim would say, taking him on his knee and kissing him; but in his heart he felt it was not right—that sternness and correction would

have to come some day, and that the child's promises were piecrust of the flimsiest description. But that day was not yet. In the meantime his love and confidence had to be gained ; respect would surely follow.

True to his promise, Vraille searched the advertisement columns of the local papers, attended fairs and auctions, made known his wants to one or two "horsey" gentlemen, and at last succeeded in finding a reliable pony and a suitable cart.

When this equipage stood in the barrack square, and little Jim, holding his father's hand, looked at it preparatory to taking his first drive, his exclamations of delight made the walls of the old fort ring again.

"Yearl poneeancart," he cried, stamping his feet with excitement ; pony got yearl tail an' pitty curls ; me goin' 'idin' in yearl poneeancart—'anter kiss ponee tail."

"No, no," said Jim, catching him up and jumping into the cart ; "you can't do that. There sit on my knee, so, and keep as quiet as you can. Now, here we go ! Well, what is it ?"

"Lalla come too ; Lalla come too."

"No, she'll come another day."

"Lalla come nudder day," he repeated, leaning back and shouting to a retreating female figure in the passage behind him as they moved on. "'Ook 'olly 'olear," he cried to the sentry on the gate, "me got *yearl* ponee now ! 'Olly 'olear can't come with daddee —on'y boy." And so they crossed the drawbridge, Vraille looking rather confused as he returned the sentry's salute, and little Jim turning round to shout him a shrill good-bye with the assurance that the

"poneeancart" would come back "thum day" for Lalla.

At the tip-top of his voice Master Jim encouraged the pony and importuned his father.

"Gee-up, ponee dear!" he cried. "Daddee 'ip oo—boy gct 'ip home—daddee got big 'ip—boy 'ants daddee 'ip—boy 'ants 'ip ponee—gee-up, gee-up—oh! poneeancart 'topped—'ook, daddee! ickle piggee in er woad—goggie in er woad—come on, goggie" (this to Mr. Wilkes, who, with lolling tongue and leisurely gait, was slowly following them) "ponee going on 'gain—gee-up ponee—boy 'ants 'ip ponee—p'ease—" and so on unceasingly.

"Look here," said Jim at last, looking down at the little writhing figure on his knee; "you must try and moderate your transports and sit still, or we shan't get along at all."

"Me 'ants ter drive ponee self—me 'ants t'hold 'ip."

"Well, you shall drive yourself then; here, catch hold of the reins. Hold 'em tight now, or the pony will run away." He put the end of the reins where they were buckled together into his hand, and this quieted him considerably, so far as movement was concerned, for he now imagined he had an important duty to perform, and held the buckle clenched in both chubby fists; but his expressions of delight at all he saw, his exhortations to the pony, his asides to Mr. Wilkes, and his perpetual questioning of his father on all sorts of subjects relevant and otherwise, abated not one jot.

When they reached the town, through which they were obliged to pass, Master Jim recognised many

friends, and saluted them all in loud tones, never failing to call special attention to the “poneeancart.”

Every now and again he turned his face, flushed with excitement, up to his father’s, and said, “Daddee, dear.”

The pony was not a fast-goer, and their progression was slow, so that St. Dogwells had ample opportunity to see and enjoy the fun. Blinds were pulled up, noses were flattened against window-panes, shop-boys giggled, servant-maids stared, passers-by stopped to look; but James Vraille, utterly unconscious of these signs of interest, drove solemnly on.

“Lor, ma!” exclaimed the eldest Miss Coxhead; “there’s that Major Vraille driving with his brat in a pony-cart.”

“Come away from the window, then, and don’t let people see you looking at him,” said the maternal Coxhead, hurrying to catch a glimpse of what her daughter had described; “he’s not a proper person for you to notice in any way, my dear.”

Mrs. Bompas saw him from a shop counter, where she was making some minor purchases in company with a tall girl dressed in black, a stranger to St. Dogwells.

“Look quick!” she whispered, nudging her companion with her elbow. “Do you see that man with grey hair driving a pony-carriage?”

The girl turned her head slowly, and with a rather haughty movement backward in her chair drew her arm out of reach of the pushing elbow. “No,” she said, with a ring of musical merriment in her voice, “I did not, I am afraid. Is he a celebrity?”

“Hush! no, nothing particular; only—but I’ll tell

you about him some other time ; ” and Mrs. Bompas, blushing brightly, went on with her purchases.

Colonel Taplow saw him.

“ What can the army be coming to when officers are allowed to make exhibitions of themselves in this way ? ” he said to his wife as Vraille raised his hat to them.

Mrs. Taplow bowed and smiled.

“ His whole life is an exhibition of immorality,” she replied.

“ ’Ook Mis’ Taplow ! ” yelled Master Jim. “ Boy holdin’ *huins*, and drivin’ *yearl* poneeancart.”

“ Gently, my son,” said Jim, “ not quite so loud, there’s a good little chap.” He might as well have cautioned a thunderstorm.

“ ’Top ! ’top, ponee ! ” cried the boy excitedly, a little further on. “ Me ’ants ter get out.”

“ No, no,” said Jim, “ sit still; you can’t get out. Come, be a good boy, or I must take you home.”

But even this threat was of no avail.

“ ’Top ! ’top ! ” he screamed; “ me ’ants ter get out —me ’ants ’ponge-cake. Whoa ! ’top, ponee—’top ponee, de-ar ! ”

So, in the middle of the town, Vraille was obliged to stop.

“ I’ll just think twice before I take you out with me again, you obstinate young rascal. Now, if I get you a sponge-cake, will you promise me to be good ? ”

The child left off shouting and looked up at him, his face all quivering with excitement, and a look of solemn sadness dawning in his large, serious eyes.

“ Me not a orty boy, daddee,” he said slowly.

"No, not a bit, God bless your simplicity, not a bit a naughty boy. Oh, how careful, how truthful we ought to be! I did not mean to hurt your little feelings, Jim, boy; indeed I didn't."

"'Ant a 'ponge-cake, daddee."

"Come on, then. You should have a thousand, if they were not likely to give you croup or something"

As there was little chance of the pony running away, Vraille left him to his own devices while he carried the boy into the confectioner's shop which Master Jim's quick eyes had detected, and with which he turned out to be tolerably well acquainted.

"Mrs. Foresight often brings him in for a bun or something," the shopwoman explained, as Jim made known his wants; "he's very fond of them sponge-cakes, too; ain't you, dickey? Little Jim's a great favourite in the town, I can tell you, sir," she added, as she put the cake into the boy's hand and asked him for a kiss.

Vraille laid sixpence on the counter and forgot to take up his change.

Soon they were on the road again, and now Master Jim, busily engaged with his cake and covering himself and his father with crumbs, was fairly quiet.

It was a beautiful day; summer had been long in coming that year, and now that it had come at last, nature seemed all the more glad to see it, and was smiling pleasantly. For weeks past the same dry wind which had robbed the spring of half its beauty had been whirling the dust in clouds over the parched country and along the clean-swept roads, piling it up into little heaps behind door-ways and in corners

smothering everything, and causing the farmers to complain with more than the usual dissatisfaction of their class at the want of rain. The little that had fallen had been licked up by the dry tongue of the fierce east wind before it could sink below the surface of the thirsty soil. But a shower overnight had washed the dust away, and the fields looked fresh and cool ; and though the land still wanted rain, the genial sun and gentle air were doing their best to deck it out gaily for the summer.

It was a delightful drive, Vraille thought, who, happy in himself, perhaps, was in the humour to admire. The ferns in the banks and hedges were pushing up their fronds like bishops' croziers in miniature ; and here and there a foxglove nodded its stately head at them as they passed. Sweet scents were borne on the gentle breeze, and the drowsy air was full of the hum of insect-life. Overhead rang out the joyous song of the lark, and from afar came the mechanical notes of the cuckoo's cry. Thoroughly as he enjoyed the sense of peace inspired by these sights and sounds, and much as he would have liked to prolong his drive, for the child's sake he turned when they had gone a mile or so beyond the town, fearing he would be tired before they reached home. The cake was by this time finished, and little Jim's mouth again free to give full vent to his feelings, which he did with enthusiastic shrillness. He told his father all sorts of stories about the places, people, and animals they passed on the road ; he recounted former experiences, and suggested possibilities with an appended "hink." In fact he was exceedingly communicative and agreeable, filling up all

pauses in the conversation with "Gee-up, ponee," and "Come on, goggie," until they reached the town once more. Here he suddenly became excited. "Mis' Tharling," he shouted, alternately waving his arms and pointing. "Oh ! Mis' Tharling—'ook, daddee ! "

Vraille looked in the direction thus vaguely indicated, and saw his subaltern's wife a little way ahead.

Little Jim continued to jump and wriggle and shout "Mis' Tharling—I 'ove oo !" until they overtook the little lady, when Vraille raised his hat, and she smiled and nodded.

"'Top ! 'top, poneeancart ! Mis' Tharling, me 'ants ter get out ! "

There was no help for it. They stopped ; and Vraille began to make his apologies for his son's behaviour.

"He never lets me pass without a word," said Cicely. "You know me, don't you, little Jim ? "

"There is not much doubt about that," said Vraille, laughing.

"Oh, he's a charming boy, Major Vraille. Every one loves him, and he and I are the best of friends. I've been meaning to ask you, the first time I saw you, to let him come down and play with my little girl some afternoon. Now do, Major ! when shall it be ? "

"The sooner the better," laughed Jim, good-humouredly. "Shall I send him down to-morrow ? "

"To-morrow, by all means—at four, say ? "

"Or, if you will allow me, Mrs. Starling, I will bring him myself."

"Yes, please do," said Cicely ; and with this understanding between them, they went their separate ways,

Vraille to his fort, where Master Jim burst into a passion of seemingly inconsolable grief on being parted from his “poneeancart,” Cicely to her lodgings to tell Tom of the arrangements she had made for the morrow.

“There he sat,” she said, “with scarcely any room for his long legs in that little pony-cart, the child cuddled up on his knee, his clothes all tumbled and untidy, and simply covered with crumbs, looking as happy as a king. If it were not for you, Tom, I’d *love* that man.”

Punctually at four o’clock next day the pony-cart stopped in front of the lodging-house front door. Mrs. Bompas saw it from a distance, and hurried home to change her frock—until then she had quite forgotten that she owed Mrs. Starling a call.

“Now,” said Jim, when he had made his salutations, “I can’t answer for his good behaviour myself, you know, so I’ve sent the trap back for Judith; she’ll keep him in order, and take him home when you’ve had enough of him.”

This arrangement having received Cicely’s approval, she made sundry overtures to Master Jim, and with little difficulty succeeded in inducing him to sit upon her knee. His novel surroundings had rather a subduing effect upon him at first; he stared about him with one finger in his mouth, and reassured himself occasionally by remarking, “Daddee not go ‘way.’” But presently, when Miss Starling was introduced, he soon fell to hugging and kissing her, saying that he loved her; and when his feelings had in some measure been reciprocated, and kindly relations had been fully

established, he submitted willingly enough to be borne off to continue his flirtations elsewhere.

"That's like a child," said Jim. "Lavish all your care and affection on him; give him all he wants; do every mortal thing you can to please him; and when another child comes along, whom perhaps he has never seen in his life before, he will leave you without a moment's scruple, without even bidding you good-bye."

"Ah, but he'd soon be crying to come back to you again," said Cicely.

"Only when he found out that he wanted something which no one else could give him. A child's love is cupboard love; and I don't believe a child has any sense of gratitude whatever."

"Why, of course not," she replied, thinking probably that this strange man had given the subject more philosophical study than practical attention.

"And yet," he continued, "we never look for gratitude in children; we never want it. It would spoil the simplicity of their ideal faith in us. It is we who feel grateful to them; we must, we cannot help it, it is our nature."

"It is your nature to be very kind to them, Major Vraille, I think."

"Small merit in that, I fear. The difficulty is to be kind to those who—" he hesitated, but went on—"who illuse us, or misjudge, or disappoint us; a little child cannot do those things. Only intention wounds; a child has no intention. I have sometimes wondered whether it is the selfish gratification of knowing that children think no ill of us that makes us love them."

"Oh, no," cried Cicely, "I cannot allow that. I am

certain *I* never felt that, and pretty sure Tom never did."

He laughed. "Of course not," he said. "How should you? How should Tom, as you call him? But you have at least felt the soothing influence of a child's society; and is there not a certain amount of selfish gratification in the certainty that your child is always pleased to see you and talk to you and be with you?"

"I suppose there is," she said thoughtfully.

"A man whose best efforts and hardest work have brought him nothing but a cold word of approval from the outside world knows that he has only to go home and dance round the room once or twice for his child to be delighted with him; he knows that whatever happens—whether he succeeds or fails, whether his luck is good or bad, whether he makes mistakes or even does wrong—his child's faith in him will remain the same; and he knows that he can easily gain his child's praise when blame is being heaped upon him by every one else." He stopped suddenly, and looked rather confused. "But I did not come here to bore you with my reflections," he said; "let's talk of something else."

"You don't bore me a bit; I like it," said Cicely, naïvely. "It is a treat to hear some one talk of things outside St. Dogwells."

She had never before talked to him alone or for any length of time; but now, as they chatted on, she noticed a certain air of sincerity about him which somehow made his most trivial remarks appear worth listening to, and as he seemed to be interested in what she had to say in return—which no one else in St.

Dogwells ever was—they got on capitally. Sometimes he expressed himself, as he had done when talking of children, in a slow and rather pedantic way, as if carefully propounding the exact conclusion he had come to after deliberate thought; at others there was a tinge of bitterness, though not of cynicism, in his remarks; but occasionally his sallow cheek would flush, his eyes would sparkle, and he would speak rapidly for a moment or two with something like enthusiasm. Such signs of a quick sympathy were, however, very few and always transitory; but they were not lost upon her, and the thought that he tried to suppress them, led her to believe that behind his rather melancholy demeanour there lay something out of the common which it would be rather interesting to reveal. It was when she happened to mention that Tom had gone out to get something in the town for Mr. Blythe, who was expected to return to St. Dogwells in a day or two, that he showed most animation.

"There are some people," he exclaimed, "who will do nothing for themselves that gives them the least trouble if they can get any one else to do it for them. That husband of yours is an unselfish, good-natured boy, and Blythe, I am afraid, is rather given to over-driving willing horses. Ever since I've been here he has been either shirking his work altogether, or getting it done for him. I do like a man to be thorough; if anything is worth doing at all, it is worth doing well—work or play. It is thoroughness that makes a reliable man and a good officer."

Cicely knew what he meant and looked unutterably happy; she felt terribly guilty, though, for having so

often told Tom that his good offices up at the fort were not properly appreciated.

"I hear," he continued, before she was able to get out a word, "that they are at last going to send us that other battery and detachment of Infantry which they have been talking of sending ever since the fort has been occupied, and that will lessen his work and give you both some companionship. It must be dreadfully dull for you."

"It is dull sometimes," she said, "but it must be worse for you up in that dreary old fort."

"I'm used to it, and have got to like it; but I suppose I shall have to clear out when these other people come."

"I wonder you stay here at all," she said.

"I wonder too, sometimes; but all places are pretty much the same to a man like me, and St. Dogwells seems to suit the boy."

The door opened very suddenly, and Tom Starling rushed into the room with—"I say, Cis, here's Mrs. Bompas and—oh! I beg pardon, Major; I did not know you were here."

Scarcely had Tom recovered from his embarrassment, when there was a ring at the bell, and Vraillé rose to his feet, showing, to Cicely's surprise, a sudden desire to be off. Judith would take the boy home, he said, and he was very much obliged to Mrs. Starling for——

The figure that followed Mrs. Bompas into the room arrested his attention, and he broke off in the middle of his polite little speech. He did not notice the fat widow's outstretched hand any more than he did her rosy blushes; he saw nothing but a face that brought

back the past with its crowd of remembrances ; he heard nothing but a pleasant voice which said—" You need not trouble to introduce us, Mrs. Bompas ; we have met before."

" You have not forgotten me then ? " said the voice again, presently—low this time, and quite close to him.

He held a small gloved hand in his, and was gazing into a pair of hazel eyes that looked up at him earnestly. " No, Miss Dare," he said ; " of course I have not forgotten you."

" I don't wonder at your being surprised to see me. It is an extraordinary coincidence—a very lucky one, for me. I received your letter soon after Mrs. Bompas—but let me explain from the beginning."

There was a buzz of voices ; Cicely and Tom were both talking at once, perhaps to cover the awkwardness of the past few minutes. Mrs. Bompas was looking scarcely so self-satisfied as usual.

Edith Dare and James Vraille sat down in a corner side by side ; and she explained.

CHAPTER IV.

GUILDHALL VILLA AND GOLDEN HILL.

HE had done a very gallant thing, and had been recommended for the Victoria Cross—so Tom Starling, and Cicely, and Mrs. Bompas understood from Edith Dare; but that was “once,” a long, long time ago, thousands of miles away, in a foreign land, during a war that had never interested anybody very much and was now well-nigh forgotten. The significance of the story had lost its effect, especially as he was not really a V.C.; and Mrs. Bompas, at any rate, was not very much impressed when she heard it.

“Dear me,” she said, “who’d have thought it? But every one is recommended for distinctions now-a-days. There’s that Colonel Smith of the Yeomanry, you know; he very nearly got a C.B., or something.”

It was very creditable, of course; but what was far more material to the issue just at present was that the London papers had lately published a full and authentic account of the military scandal, *Vraille v. Vraille and Rook*, which the local papers had copied faithfully.

Here, then, was a solution of the whole mystery concerning “that Major Vraille up at the fort,” and what mattered it that *she*, apparently, had been to blame? As usual, there were, of course, two sides to

every case, and as this particular case had been undefended, the world had only heard one side. It was an ugly business, and the St. Dogwells world was scandalized.

But what did brave Mrs. Bompas care? Here was an excellent opportunity of showing St. Dogwells that she, at least, was above such petty malice, and that, as she had taken "the military" under her wing, she was prepared to defend them against all comers. They and she were a cut above ordinary St. Dogwellites. Consequently, invitations to tea and dinner left Golden Hill and arrived at Guildhall Villa and Fort Gaunt as frequently as ever. But Vraille was in no humour for festivity, still less for Golden Hill festivity, and he "regretted his inability" upon the shallowest pretexts. For, by visiting Golden Hill, he ran the chance of meeting Miss Dare; and it seemed to him that throwing himself in her path meant perpetuating that feeling of obligation from which he would so gladly release her if he knew how. She had now more than once alluded to it in terms that had made his cheeks flush. His presence could not but be a sort of reminder of her indebtedness, since she would look at it in that light; and as, for some reason or other, he was anxious to spare her any awkwardness he could arising out of the situation, he avoided her altogether as the best means of doing so. But why was she there at all? What strange fortune had brought old Dare's daughter into the near surroundings of his life, as if to remind him of that part of it which he least wished to remember, and just when he had determined to put it behind him for evermore as a dream, an unreality?

Why, of all the advertisements which she must have read, had she pitched upon Mrs. Bompas's, not only to answer, but to choose for acceptance? Because Mrs. Bompas had offered very opportunely, as it happened, just such a situation as she was anxious to fill, and to fill quickly, and because the widow's terms and conditions had appeared more suitable than any others. It was all plain enough. No special fate had brought these things about—only pure chance. Chance ruled the destinies of man; life was a toss-up. Some men were lucky, others unlucky; he was one of the unlucky; he had tossed-up and lost. It was extraordinary how little interest he took now in the revolutions of Fortune's wheel, and how little he cared to calculate the causes that had brought this or that about—what did it matter? It *was*. But it did occur to him that he had answered Miss Dare's letter from St. Dogwells, and that she must have received that answer just about the time that her negotiations with Mrs. Bompas were going forward—whether before or after their final settlement, she had not said; so that he could readily account for the surprise of their meeting having been entirely on his side. And now that they had met, in spite of his indifference to the ordinary changes and developments of time and chance, he could not but recall the night he and Colonel Dare had spent together on the Afghan maidan. The old gentleman had made certain requests, and he, in turn, had made certain promises. Little as he thought then that his answers were more than the mere meaningless humourings of a man on the verge of imbecility, he was now morally bound by

those promises. Old Dare's babblings had not been all nonsense ; the girl had been left in straits—sore straits for all he knew—and he had promised her father to be kind to her if they should ever meet. How had he kept his word ?—by avoiding her. It was not right ; he must put all other considerations upon one side and assure himself that there was nothing he could do to render her destitute condition less hard to bear. Now that his "business," as Uncle Ben termed it, was at last over, and the anxiety of it a thing to be forgotten as speedily as possible, he would put his good resolutions into effect.

An invitation to dinner from Mrs. Bompas lay upon his table. He sat down there and then and wrote his acceptance.

As he was blotting the envelope, a little voice in the passage outside, cried, "P'ease may I come in ?"

"Yes, come in, little chap," he shouted in answer ; and added to himself, "Welcome as sunshine."

Little Jim came in.

"Daddee been eatin' his dinner," he said, looking at the table on which the remains of a frugal lunch were scattered about untidily.

Every day after lunch the boy paid his father the same visit. It was as much an institution as the romp they always had together in the evening before bed-time.

Vraille turned round in his chair and held out his arms. His little son came toddling into them. The victory had long since been won. There was no shyness on the child's part now ; no doubt on the man's. Confidence had been gained and was freely

given. Perfect concord reigned ; perfect understanding existed.

“ Well,” said Jim, picking him up and setting him upon his knee, “ and what did you see out walks this morning ? ” (“ Walks ” was the correct vernacular expression, so Jim understood.)

“ Moo-cows ; an’ gee-gees ; an’ a gonkey—zes ; an’ a ickle girly, Mis’ Tarling’ ickle girly, hink—an’ Miss Dare ! ” Master Jim’s linguistic performances had now reached a degree of proficiency that rendered conversation, in the shape of question and answer, possible —for a time.

“ Oh, you saw Miss Dare, did you ? and what did she say to you ? ”

“ Boy got pitty eyes, an’ pitty curls, an’ pitty cheeks, an’ pitty nose——”

“ Come, come,” interrupted Jim, “ draw it mild. But never mind—what else did she say ? ”

“ Boy kissed Miss Dare. Miss Dare *clied*.” This he said nodding his head in impressive affirmative.

“ Cried ! did she cry ? ”

“ Zes—boy ’ants ter put on ’olly ’olear cloze an’ march.” He wriggled off Vraille’s knee and toddled to a cupboard in the corner of the room.

With perfect gravity “ the officer commanding troops, St. Dogwells,” followed his son to the cupboard, unlocked it, and produced the diminutive jacket and forage-cap in which Master Jim was accustomed to be dressed when following his father in the solemn after-luncheon march round the room, which formed part of every day’s customary programme of amusement.

It was ridiculous, absurd, nonsensical, to see a man

of Major Vraille's height and figure following a child of little Jim's proportions round and round a room, solemnly blowing a trumpet made of a roll of paper, and stepping high ; but so it was—and he could make a much bigger fool of himself than that upon occasion. There was a want of dignity about him, as Colonel Taplow oftentimes remarked ; and yet neither Colonel Taplow, nor any one else in St. Dogwells, had found him particularly approachable. On the contrary, the St. Dogwellites had long since learnt to let him alone as a dangerous man to interfere with ; for many of them, Colonel Taplow among the number, had received snubs from him which they were quite unable to forget.

“ Band ‘top ! ” cried the boy.

Vraille instantly ceased his *too-tooings*.

“ Halt—right turn—’tenshun—’tand ’till—march—band play ’gain.”

All these words of command Vraille obeyed implicitly, and the drill continued without intermission and with very little variation for the next quarter of an hour, when, without warning, the instructor suddenly complained of fatigue and boredom.

“ Me tired, daddee,” he said ; “ take off ’olly ’olear cloze, p’ease ; had ’nuff.”

“ Well, I’m not sorry to hear that,” said Jim, bending down over the boy and stripping him of his fine feathers ; “ it’s too hot for this sort of game. Come, let’s get out your blocks and build houses.”

“ Zes, p’ease,” said Master Jim. So the blocks were produced, and a magnificent edifice was soon in course of erection on the table. With great difficulty Jim

prevented the restless little hands from knocking it down prematurely, and at last they escaped, bent upon destruction.

"Just wait till I've put the roof on," said Jim —but too late. The handsome building, when within an ace of completion, tottered, fell—a ruin.

"Oh, those impatient little paws!" he cried, "will they never learn to wait? Is fulfilment a meaningless word to you, my boy? Is it our nature to destroy? Destruction is so easy, so pleasant, too. Well, well, wiser heads than yours have done the same."

The boy looked up at him with that old odd look of intense sagacity he always wore when trying unsuccessfully to understand what was beyond his comprehension.

"What a world of speculation there is in those bright eyes of yours! How hard they try to read my meaning in my own! They cannot, can they? No, not yet; but some day they will understand. Some day, my boy, I will tell you how your baby life built up what all the world could not pull down."

"Boy 'ants ter play horses now, daddee," was all the answer Jim received.

Playing horses was another rather heating game, but in spite of the state of the temperature, which was excessive that sultry afternoon, Vraillé allowed himself to be driven about the room by a piece of string tied to his leg until the amusement for some reason—certainly not want of effort on his part—ceased to interest. When he had kicked and plunged and pranced himself into a profuse perspiration, he was requested to play at being a tunnel, which he did by going down upon

his hands and knees on the floor, and making an angular and not very picturesque archway of himself through which little Jim could crawl.

As the train emerged from the tunnel for about the twentieth time, the prostrate form of Mr. Wilkes, lying in a shady corner of the room, caused it to assume an upright position, an example quickly followed by the tunnel.

“Goggee doing his by-byes, daddee,” said the train.

“Yes, poor goggee’s tired; don’t disturb him,” said the tunnel.

Obedience is not a first instinct of nature; it is a social acquisition. Master Jim, not having as yet acquired anything from society’s teaching, and very little from parental authority, proceeded without hesitation to disobey. Seizing the whip with which he had been lashing his father’s legs while playing horses, he brought it down upon poor Mr. Wilkes’s nose with a crack quite hard enough to put an end to the dog’s slumbers in a single instant.

“Now that’s very naughty of you, Jim,” said Vraille, catching hold of the whip; “very naughty indeed. I told you not to touch him. No, I shan’t let go. If you do it again, I shall take the whip away. I’m always telling you not to hit the poor dog.”

“Goggee orful orty gog—orful orty. Boy *lash oo, oo orty gog.*”

“It’s you that’s naughty, not the poor dog. Now pat him and tell him you’re sorry.”

“Boy ‘orry, orty goggee,” said Master Jim, only half repentant, but patting Mr. Wilkes’s ugly head as he spoke.

"That's right. Now, you won't do it again, will you?"

"No, not do it 'gain—efer."

"If you do," said Jim, knowing full well how much reliance might be placed in his son's promises, "I shall certainly take the whip from you, and—and put you in the corner."

He turned away that the child might not see his smile. Put him in the corner! What a ridiculous form of correction! And yet he knew it was the punishment Judith administered for the graver class of Master Jim's offences. He hoped the boy would not commit himself again; for as it was part of his creed always to fulfil a promise, so it followed that he must carry out a threat. By never breaking his word to his child he hoped to inspire respect and enforce——

Crack!

"Very well then, I must do as I said. Now, I shall put your whip away up here until you are a good boy again; and, as I said so, you must go into the corner."

He had no very definite idea how this punishment ought to be carried out; but the boy knew perfectly well, and of his own accord toddled off, merrily enough, to a vacant corner near the window, and stood in it with his back to the wall smiling at his father.

This would never do, and just as Jim was beginning to feel that the wind had been taken out of his sails, the boy remarked——

"Coming out now—'ood boy 'gain."

"No, no," said Jim, biting his lip; "this is not a game. You must stay where you are till you understand that you've been disobedient." So he placed a

chair in front of Master Jim, who for a time peered alternately over and under a rail in the back of it, saying, "Peep-bo, daddee!"

Vraille took no notice.

Presently the "Peep-bo!" ceased. Little Jim began to realize that there was no fun going forward, and that he was really in disgrace. The corners of his mouth drooped; his eyes closed; and his face became all puckers and dimples; his head fell backward, as his hands clutched the rail before him, and he burst into a torrent of contrite grief.

"Boo-hoo! P'ease, dad-dee de-ar—lem-me come out—boo-hoo!—oh, dear! oh, dear!—me orful orty—boy—'anter come out—'orry, daddee de-ar—boo-hoo! oh! oh!—daddee—de-ar dad-dee."

Jim could stand it no longer. Every wail seemed to cut like a knife into his heart. It was such a cruel thing for a great big man to cause a little bit of a boy such infinite distress—distress out of all proportion to the original offence—enough to expiate a murder.

"Well, I'll let you out now," he said, sitting on the chair before the culprit; "but do, *do* be good, and *don't* let me have to punish you again—I hate it, that's the truth."

"Ze-es," said the boy, his tears trickling down his cheeks and nose; but his dismal cries ceasing on the instant.

"What did you do naughty?"

"Dunno, daddee de-ar"—a sob—" 'ip goggee—hink." Oh, what was the good of punishing simplicity, in itself so utterly innocent? Where was the sense of it? He caught the child up in his arms and hugged him to

his heart—he, a man, who should have been a woman because of that very heart! He kissed him and wiped away his tears ; he fondled him and talked to him in simple, silly language, trying to make him understand the difference between right and wrong, obedience and disobedience. He called the dog to them, and made the boy pat him and tell him over again that he was sorry for what he had done. Eventually he handed him over to Judith, asking her to get him ready for a drive in the pony-cart ; and so ended Vraillé's first attempt to enforce his son's obedience. But in all his softness and, if it must so be called, his weakmindedness, there remained one redeeming feature of determination. He refused, kindly but decidedly, to let little Jim play with his whip again that day. "That," as Judith said to herself while she was dressing the boy for his drive, "was the dear man all over."

The object of their drive was tea—tea with Mrs. Starling. Often since the day when Vraillé had first taken his son to Guildhall Villa had the visit been repeated, and generally for a similar purpose. The children were little links that bound the interests of Dismal Jimmy, as Tom even now sometimes called him, to those of Cicely, Tom's wife, and were daily tending to draw them closer and closer together. Out of these common interests the intimacy had sprung; through them it had increased to something very like firm friendship, and James Vraillé, though he persistently refused other invitations, was often to be found spending an afternoon at Guildhall Villa.

When the children had been banished to upper regions, and the expected arrival of fresh troops at

Fort Gaunt—a subject which just then was exciting St. Dogwells' interest—had been under discussion for some time, Vraille said—

"What bothers me is where to go. Go I must, for the fort will be full next week, and though of course I could still keep my quarters if I liked, I think it would be best to get the boy out of the way. Only yesterday I overheard Blythe say he hated having squealing brats about the place."

"He's a horrid man," ejaculated Cicely.

"It's only his way," said Tom; "he didn't mean it."

"Anyhow," Jim pursued, "I'd better go; but the difficulty is to find a house. They are all either too large or two small."

Tom and his wife looked at one another. He nodded to her, she to him, he frowned slightly and shook his head, and she, understanding from these signs that she was expected to act as spokeswoman, after some hesitation said rather nervously—

"Tom and I have been thinking, Major Vrail'e, that as there are a couple of rooms above ours in these lodgings furnished and unoccupied, if you continued to live at the fort, Judith and little Jim might, perhaps, be able to make themselves comfortable here."

"By Jove," he exclaimed gaily, "that's a capital idea. Where's your landlady? Let's have her up and make an inspection of the premises." It was the Jim of former days who spoke, the Jim that used to be, with his quick impetuosity and ready adaptation to circumstances, the Jim unaccustomed to thought. It was the Jim, whom after-troubles had subdued, made diffident

and shy, retiring, fearful of intruding his melancholy self upon others, who continued—"But the boy would be a nuisance; he would disturb you."

"A nuisance!" cried Cicely. "Little Jim a nuisance!"

"And I should be running in and out all day, tramping up and down the stairs."

Tom laughed. "A little extra tramping won't be noticed much, I can tell you, with what goes on already."

It did not require much persuasion to induce Major Vraille to interview the landlady. These young people meant to be kind to him, and he felt their kindness all the more keenly for having so few friends in the world to turn to just then. Since he had decided that the boy must leave the fort, this was by far the best arrangement he could make; and the idea of having him under a friendly roof, with another child for a companion, and a kind, motherly little woman to take an interest in him, was an inducement strong enough to tempt him to accept the offer. But before closing with it he consulted Judith. She raised no objection. "Anywheres," she said; "it's all much the same to him an' me, so long as we're together like. And as the fort's to be no more to ourselves, but full of a lot of screeching young orficers, p'raps 'tis best to get out of it, and go to a house as we know is occupied by a lady—pretty nigh the only one in the place."

This being so, Mrs. Foresight and Master Jim were removed, bag and baggage, to the two spare rooms in Guildhall Villa, where Jim visited them day by day with the regularity of clock-work, but creeping up and

down the stairs so noiselessly that Cicely never knew when he came or went.

One day—it was the day of Mrs. Bompas's dinner party, when that good lady, whose visits latterly had been very frequent, would presumably be too much occupied with household cares to pay calls—Cicely went up to the room at the top of the house whence peals of childish laughter were proceeding, and tapped at the door. Vraille, with the boy in his arms and his necktie under one ear, opened it.

"You oblige me to catch you when I can," she said, "and I shan't apologise. Why is it that, ever since the boy's been here, you have crept past my drawing-room door like a thief in the night instead of coming in and seeing one like a Christian—or a good Samaritan, rather?"

She understood from his answer that, although he had consented to occupy a portion of the house, it must still be considered as her own, and that her drawing-room was as sacred as ever against intrusion.

"Intrusion?"

"I am only *too* ready," he laughed, "to accept invitations."

"Accept one now, then," she replied, laughing back at him as she tripped down the stairs.

"Judith!" he shouted. "Please come and take the boy."

Judith appeared, but Master Jim flung his arms round his father's neck, buried his head in his shoulder and pleaded dismally—"Don't go 'way, daddee dear, 'top and play with boy; de-ar daddee—p'ease."

Vraille looked over the yellow curls at Judith with a

remorseful expression on his face, which she seemed to understand. "It's just right it should be so, sir," she said; "I told yer it'd come -all in different ways."

"It hardly seems fair," he said to himself as he made his way down the stairs to the drawing-room.

When Tom presently came in, complaining of the heat, the conversation turned upon the weather. It was frightfully hot, almost unprecedented, and the long-continued drought was doing a deal of mischief. Every one was complaining, and it was even said that the cattle in the fields were dying of starvation; there was hardly a blade of green grass or a drop of water anywhere.

"Except at Golden Hill," said Tom; "Mrs. Bompas's cows never want; she has milk and butter and cream just as usual—so she says, and I believe her."

This remark caused Cicely to throw a quick glance in Vraille's direction. Far from seeming to be annoyed at Tom's rather disdainful reference to Mrs. Bompas, he laughed; and instead of allowing the subject to drop, pursued it, asking all manner of questions about the mode of life at Golden Hill. As he listened to Cicely's (and more especially to Tom's) answers, his face became graver and graver. Tom did not mince matters, but his wife tried to do so.

"And Miss Dare," he asked at last, "do you ever see her?"

Cicely saw her constantly, liked her very much, and often had a talk with her.

"Is she happy where she is, do you think? Is Mrs. Bompas kind to her?"

"Happy!" burst out Tom, without giving her a

chance to answer. "If the truth were known, she's jolly *happy*, I expect. What with those children and the servants, I should say any girl who hadn't a skin as thick as the sole of my boot would be absolutely wretched—" Cicely tried hard to catch his eye, but it was fixed on Vraille's attentive face—"I'd almost sooner see a sister of mine dead than governess in that house. Old Mother B. has had three since we've been here, and now she's started what she calls a companion. Companion! A nice sort of companion *she* is for a clever lady-like girl! Why, even Miss Meek couldn't stand it, and Miss Meek was not a patch on Miss Dare, was she, Cis?" He saw her danger-signals at last, stopped short, blushed, stammered, tried to explain that he held Mrs. Bompas in great respect, and made matters worse by excusing her follies on the plea of irresponsible silliness. The greater part of the after conversation he left to Cicely.

"Did I really call her old Mother B.?" he said afterwards. "Oh, Lord! Well, he took it pretty calmly anyhow, and it's my belief he don't care a snap of his fingers for her."

What he had said about the corn in Egypt at Golden Hill was, nevertheless, true, and as Mrs. Bompas seemed to take so great an interest in the lonely major, in spite of his misfortunes, perhaps the lonely major could not, after all, do better than console himself with the widow's purse, property and person, as every one said he assuredly would do in course of time. A man of his position, St. Dogwells argued, who first occupied quarters in a dismal fort, and then sent his belongings to lodgings in the heart of the town, instead of renting

a proper house of his own, did so under the stern necessity of economy ; and if, as it seemed, Golden Hill and all that appertained to it were to be had for the asking, surely it would not be long now before the necessary question was put.

It was a prize worth a poor man's winning. Everything at Golden Hill was fat and rich and prosperous. Its meadows were sweet and green and velvety ; its Alderney cows yielded the best milk ; its dairy the best cream and butter ; its cochin-chinas the best eggs. In the house the pile of the carpets was thick, the folds of the curtains heavy, and the furniture mahogany—except in the drawing-room, where the chairs and sofas had legs of ormolu and crimson seats and cushions. Specimens of filigree silver occupied prominent positions ; antimacassars were abundant ; but, except for a pile of music that stood by the piano, there was not a scrap of printed matter to be seen anywhere.

In this well-ordered drawing-room Mrs. Bompas, in pale blue satin, pearls and lace (Maltese, most of it, she said) received her guests, and to the sound of a gong marshalled them in to dinner—to Vraille falling the honour of taking, first his hostess across the hall, then the head of her table. Beside him sat Edith Dare.

As it was only a friendly little dinner party, Dr. Spill, the family physician, having been invited just to divide the Starlings and balance the table, the younger Bompases, Algernon and Gwendoline, took their accustomed seats between their mother and her “ companion ” and were cautioned in the usual way. “ Now, you may

talk to one another," said Mrs. Bompas, "but if you are troublesome you will have to leave the room; so remember." Often had Jim heard that caution given under similar circumstances, never had he known it to have the least effect upon their behaviour.

"Do those young people," he asked Miss Dare, "always sit up to late dinner?"

"Always," she replied.

"And are they with you all day?"

"Nearly all day."

"Do you find them at all troublesome?"

"Very."

"And rather hard to manage, I expect?"

"I shall manage them in time."

The directness with which she answered his questions somewhat disconcerted him. He had come to the house for the express purpose of finding out whether those things which Tom had told him that afternoon were true—things which he had often before that imagined must be true; but if this Miss Dare were made of stuff sufficiently stern to cope successfully with them—if she were contented with her lot, what right had he to interfere? what right to put questions to her which might seem to be impertinent?

When Miss Dare next turned to correct some impropriety on the part of Master Algernon at Mrs. Bompas's request, he looked at her. Her face was rather pale, and just a little sad; her mouth and chin showed signs of innate determination, her eyes were large and fearless, her hands long and slim, well-shaped, and perhaps indicative of power—strength of will. That was not a womanly characteristic, according

to his ideas ; and he had almost made up his mind to trouble his head about her no more, when it occurred to him that she had the prettiest wavy hair he had ever seen, and a charmingly graceful figure, just now set off to the fullest advantage by her black silk evening dress. But more than all, there was that caressing tone in her voice, which he felt he would like to hear again. So that he found himself watching her, and thinking that, plain as she was, there was something in her face, or her manner—or was it her voice?—that decidedly interested him ; and this, he remembered, was the feeling that she had always inspired in him whenever they met.

Although he tried various topics, his attempts to draw her into conversation were all more or less frustrated by Master Algernon, who sat next her and plied her with questions whispered behind his hand.

“ If you have anything to say,” she said to him at last, “ say it out like a man and not as if you were ashamed to speak ; ” whereupon Mrs. Bompas frowned, and Algernon, who was nine years old, and resented correction before company, promptly replied—

“ Sha’n’t, so there.”

The girl’s face flushed, and Vraille saw her slim fingers close tightly round the fan in her lap.

“ Young cub,” muttered Jim between his teeth, flinging himself impatiently back in his chair.

She heard him, and looked up with a smile. “ Don’t mind him,” she said softly ; “ I’m used to it.”

“ No ; you’re not,” returned Jim, almost rudely. “ You’re not used to it. If you were, it would not matter so much.”

"Matter! I've heard you say, myself, that nothing matters." She laughed, and he, for some reason or other, blushed; he had not overcome that bad habit even yet.

In spite of the number of courses and the variety of wines; in spite of the plate and the palm leaves, the hot-house flowers and Venetian glass, the dinner was not altogether a success conversationally. The conversation was general—very general indeed, varied by long pauses which the two smaller Bompases filled up with personal altercations. At a very early stage of the proceedings these young people had begun to show signs of restlessness and mutual disagreement, and as time went on they took less and less trouble to conceal their misunderstandings. At first Miss Gwendoline had seemed rather overpowered by the grandeur of her sage green silk frock and pink sash, and had been fairly silent; but as this apparent feeling of oppression wore off, she gradually became as argumentative as her brother, who showed his indifference to finery by wiping off the soup he spilt over his black velvet with his sister's sash, and his interest in what was going forward by flatly contradicting any remark he happened to overhear. Dr. Spill, an inoffensive little man, was in this way soon reduced to practical extinction, and, except for an occasional remark muttered in an undertone to Cicely, devoted himself to his food, which he seemed to enjoy. Vraille, for the most part, appeared to be occupied with his thoughts; and so Cicely, when Master Algernon would allow her, talked in fits and starts across the table to Miss Dare. Tom laboured on manfully with his commonplaces,

Mrs. Bompas constantly interrupting the thread of his discourse by whispering injunctions to Alfred the footman or administering reprimands to her son or daughter. She apologised to him after each of these breaks, and said “Yes?” with interrogative encouragement for him to proceed; but as he had by that time usually forgotten the drift of his remarks, the point of his story, or even what he had originally begun to say, poor Tom stumbled on with decreasing meaning and increasing irritability until he found himself lost in a maze of broken sentences.

“And how do you like St. Dogwells now, Mr. Starling?” she asked during a lull, and for at least the hundredth time since she had known him. She did not put the question in a way that showed the least desire to be informed, for she followed it up by pressing him to try another cutlet, but in a purely perfunctory and wholly disinterested fashion which seemed to call for no reply. He did reply, however, and said that he had not found St. Dogwells more wildly exciting lately than usual.

“It is rather dull,” she admitted, turning towards her daughter. “Gwenny dear, take your elbows off the table, and don’t talk so loud; we can’t hear ourselves speak.”

“Not that *that* seems to signify much,” muttered Jim to himself, looking at his table-napkin.

“But Mr. Brand’s going to enliven us up next week, I hear,” said Cicely, bending forward politely. “He has consented at last to deliver a lecture in the Town Hall—on the Scotch Reformation, I believe it is to be. Are you going?”

"Not I," Mrs. Bompas replied. "What do I care whether the Scotch are reformed or not? Stuff and nonsense!"

"Reformation should begin nearer home, you think?" asked Jim, for the first time since the commencement of dinner directly addressing his hostess.

"Certainly," said Mrs. Bompas, looking quite pleased at being thus consulted.

Tom caught Cicely's eye and laughed. Mrs. Bompas nervously asked him what the joke was; but he was saved the necessity of answering by Master Algernon, who, being detected by his mother in the act of helping himself to candied fruit from the dessert dish before him, was severely reprimanded and warned that if the offence were repeated, he should be sent straightway to bed. It was repeated a little later on, he was again warned, but he was not sent to bed.

And so the dinner dragged its weary length along; course succeeded course, until the last was reached, when Tom, the trusty Tom, *à propos* of nothing in particular, but for want of anything better to say, had recourse to his London paper as a fertile source of subject-matter, and made some spasmodic remarks on the day's news.

"I had such a squabble once with Smith's boy about my London paper," said Mrs. Bompas, with some show of animation, "about two years ago now, and more. He said it was impossible to deliver it here before seven in the evening—such nonsense! I paid him out, though. I said I would not take it in at all, and I've never bought a paper of him since."

"You patronise St. Dogwells' print, then," said

Dr. Spill, brightening up, for he had some reputation in the town as an able letter-writer.

"Not I; I cannot stand those paltry little local papers," retorted Mrs. Bompas. She knew the doctor's failings, and thus mildly endeavoured to correct them by inference.

"But don't you like to know what is going on?" asked Tom.

"Oh, I know what's going on well enough," she said, shrewdly. "Algernon, if you do that again, Miss Dare shall take you straight off to bed."

Algernon did it again, Miss Dare sighed, Vraille rapped his knuckles impatiently on the table.

"Do you hear what I say, Algy?" Mrs. Bompas exclaimed, getting very red. "Don't let me have to speak to you again. Yes?" (turning again to Tom) "You were saying?"

"That there has been a terrible railway accident in America," said Tom, exasperated into sarcasm; "that there are some singularly interesting political speeches being made just now; that owing to the dry summer a ruinous rise in prices is expected; that there are some very serious complications on the Continent——"

"Are there?" she interrupted, but with neither question, surprise, exclamation, or even interest, in her tone, and her eye all the time fixed on her son.

"Which may lead to war."

"You won't have to go, will you?—Algernon!"

Master Bompas, who had been pricking his sister's elbow with his fork, desisted.

"Him!" he cried in derision, pointing the fork at Tom. "Him go! Rather not. Him and Major

Vraille ain't real soldiers, I know ; they don't wear proper red coats, they don't, and they live in lodgings."

"Algernon!" vociferated Mrs. Bompas, her face aflame ; "if you say another word, Miss Dare shall take you straight to bed. Now, you know I mean what I say."

"I shouldn't go, and she can't take me," replied Master Bompas, highly incensed at the indignity of being thus repeatedly threatened before strangers.

"Algy is a horrid boy," broke in Miss Gwendoline, resting both her elbows on the table to enable her the better to kick her brother's shins. "He's been stealing the fruit, he has, all the evening; do send him to bed, ma."

"Yah! yer little sneak; take that!" The slap he gave his sister's cheek resounded through the room, and a moment afterwards Miss Gwendoline was giving vent to a series of piercing shrieks, and vainly endeavouring to clutch her brother by the hair.

All eyes were in a moment fixed upon poor Mrs. Bompas. With her rested the responsibility of putting an end to this painful scene.

"Miss Dare," she shouted above the din, "take him to Harriet at once and tell her to put him to bed."

The boy sprang out of his chair and placed his back against the sideboard.

"If she comes near me," he screamed, "I'll kick her black and blue. Just let her try, that's all."

Edith Dare, with a quiet smile on her face, slowly rose from her seat. Vraille rose with her. Their eyes met.

"Allow me," he said ; "the boy may hurt you."

"I am not afraid," she began; but he had already twisted his fingers into the lace collar about Master Algy's neck and was holding him at arm's length, where the kicks he aimed at his captor's legs were perfectly harmless.

"Where shall I take him?" asked Jim.

"This way, please," she replied, with strange courtesy; and before Mrs. Bompas or any one else had fully realised the situation, they were in the hall together with the writhing boy between them.

It was not long before they had handed him over to Harriet's charge, but by the time they had descended to the hall again, they found that the incident had brought the long dinner to an end at last.

As Jim held open the drawing-room door for her, and her rustling skirts swept past him, she inclined her head and said, "Thank you, Major Vraille; you have been very kind to me."

He had done nothing, no more than any other man in his place would have done; but the simple words were evidently intended as an expression of gratitude, really felt.

In the dining-room, Dr. Spill was enlarging on the dirt of the town, its want of proper sanitary arrangements in the way of drainage, the probability of disease following the long drought, and other similar matters which interested Jim so little that, after a time, he lighted a cigar and stepped through the open window on to the lawn. Tom and Dr. Spill followed his example, and continued the drainage question on a garden-seat, while Vraille roamed about.

A full harvest-moon looked down upon Golden Hill,

casting deep shadows upon the lawn. The night was still and rather sultry, but, after the heat of the room, the air seemed cool and refreshing. Mrs. Bompas was wailing out her customary after-dinner lament over *The Lost Chord*, and he wandered round the house toward the drawing-room to listen, but kept himself and his cigar well out of sight.

Presently the song ceased; there was a pause, and then another hand struck the keys with another touch, and another voice began to sing. He drew closer and closer to the window, and listened—now with all his ears.

Her hands, he had noticed, were long and slim, well-formed and nervous. He understood now; they were the hands of a musician. The song she was singing was new to him, but, whatever it was, it was a treat—a treat such as he had not enjoyed for years. It changed—changed imperceptibly, and he was listening to notes that seemed familiar. He came close up to the window and leant against the framework. He could hear the words, but he could not understand their meaning, for they were German. It all flashed upon him in an instant—the dinner-party in the Indian cantonment, the ball afterwards, the first seeds of doubt and distrust sown in his heart that night. He wished he could drag himself away out of hearing; it was a terribly sad song, and seemed to him far, far sadder now than it had done then. But he could only draw closer and closer, until by stretching out his hand, he could have touched the singer.

She sang on—like a full-throated thrush—unconscious of the earnest face behind her, unconscious of

the pleasure she was giving, of the pain she was inflicting. The soft notes died sadly and slowly away, and the song ended in a sob.

“Miss Dare.”

She turned.

“It is beautiful—beautiful. Did you know I was listening?”

“No, I had no idea—I did not think any one was listening.” She rose and came to the window, turning her head toward the far end of the room, where Mrs. Bompas, with her back to them, was talking in an impressive manner to Cicely. “I was alone—singing to myself, I thought. That song is a great favourite of mine.”

He looked into her face; it was a fearless, open, truthful face. “Are you fond of sad things, then? Is life not sad enough, that you must make it sadder? Life is so short, so full of misery, real misery—why make it more miserable still with—with fictitious sorrow? Or is it that you are unhappy yourself, and cannot help singing sadly?”

“It is hardly a case of unhappiness, is it?” she said, avoiding his question; “but there is pleasure in some kinds of pain.”

“And there is pain in nearly all forms of pleasure.”

They looked into one another’s eyes; neither of them spoke for a moment; both were thinking.

“Do you take pleasure in anything?” she asked at last.

“Certainly I do—in my little chap. He is a never-ending joy.”

“And do you find pain in your fondness——” she

stopped, for the first time since he had known her showing confusion.

“Great pain—sometimes ; great pleasure always.”

It was but a step from the window to the gravel path, as it had been from the piano to the window. It had been but a step from boredom into interest ; one more, for him, from interest into enthusiasm.

Of what use to such a man were a kind uncle’s worldly admonitions, and a commanding officer’s advice as to expediency ? It was not wise, Uncle Ben had often told him, to let emotions and sympathies get the upper hand. It was not expedient to take Mrs. Bompas’s companion out into the moonlight, under Mrs. Bompas’s very nose. Over and over again had he taken himself to task for what he called the foolish impetuosity which had led him into so much trouble ; often had he resolved to be henceforth a reserved, quiet, self-contained man, a man of few words, who never spoke without thought, or acted in a hurry. All this was forgotten ; he had lost sight of the value of expediency as totally as he had, for the time being, of the letter this girl had once written him, and of the recent self-restraint of her manner. On the spur of the moment all his resolutions vanished. In the emotion of the moment all his former experience was as nothing. A simple little German song had been enough to bring back much of his lost enthusiasm ; a plain girl, whose bearing towards him had been repellent rather than attractive, by the simple power of a sympathetic voice, had kindled again the light in his eyes which care had dimmed for some long time past.

It was not only that she listened—listened and

talked, often contradicting what he said; but these very contradictions, because they were always so keen and quick and appreciative of the subject, led him to talk on and on with increasing earnestness. Sometimes he stopped, pleading his point with his hands half-stretched out before her; sometimes he ran his fingers through his short grey hair with a dubious, "We don't know; we don't know!"

She could talk as Mrs. Starling and even Uncle Ben could not, so, at least, it seemed to him. She reminded him of Doctor Dick sometimes, and he told her so.

"That is a great compliment," she said; "I have heard you speak of Doctor Doyle as I have never heard you speak of any one else."

"He could *understand*," said Jim; "he had in him the things I lack. That is why we got on so well together; his nature, his temperament, his mind were all corrections of my own. We none of us can be perfect; but I believe that if each of us could find a mind that exactly counterbalanced the worst defects in its own, that supplied those parts of it which were missing, that answered and responded to it, I believe the two blended into one would be as near——" He broke off abruptly. "But I'm very enigmatical, and daresay I've been making an ass of myself. I mean something like this: There are some people we cannot talk to, some we cannot help talking to."

"I wish," she said very slowly, "that there were more people in the world who would make asses of themselves in the same way—people who thought—who *felt*."

They were walking towards the window. Mrs. Bompas stood just inside it, and called to them. "Miss Dare," she said, "will you come in now, please; I want you to play an accompaniment for me."

They went in. The girl played while Mrs. Bompas sang, and sang her sweetest. But Jim quite forgot to say, "Thank you," when the song was finished. He had not heard a note of it; he had taken the step back—from a sort of fool's paradise into a sort of silly purgatory, where it was his business to smile at things that did not interest in the least. A moment before he—the real he—had been taken out of himself; now he was thrust back again to think and feel alone. Everything seemed vulgar and commonplace and deadly dull and stupid.

CHAPTER V.

TWO TEA-PARTIES.

TOM STARLING detested, he said, going to Golden Hill to tea ; it was worse than going there to dinner, for in the afternoon there was no chance of hearing Miss Dare sing, and, according to Tom, Miss Dare's songs did in some measure make up for the dreariness of Mrs. Bompas's dinner parties. He was a good-natured fellow, however, and after much grumbling yielded to his wife's entreaties and consented to accompany her on a duty call after one of these dinners.

Tea at Golden Hill was no mere frivolous apology for a meal ; it was a function, and a rich one. Mrs. Bompas liked hot cakes, muffins, and plenty of cream with her tea. In a lemon-coloured muslin, profusely stamped with floricultural effects, she sat behind her silver service—simpering, smiling, lisping and blushing—drinking and dispensing tea. As the Starlings looked at her they wondered whether she were at all anxious about her figure, and whether she knew that copious potations of cream were not likely to improve it. Apparently not. She seemed just as satisfied with her person as she was with everything else that was hers.

Tom was bemoaning his lengthened stay in St. Dogwells, and expressing a desire for a move. “ I am used to a pillar-to-post existence,” he said ; “ and though

being settled, as they call it, is all very well for a time, I must confess I like seeing fresh places."

"One gets tired of knocking about," said Mrs. Bompas in a superior tone. "I have had enough of it, goodness knows, and I am only too thankful to be quiet."

Her "knocking about," as the Starlings very well knew, had consisted in a periodical oscillation between St. Dogwells and Malta; but Cicely, bent on making herself agreeable, questioned her about her journeys. "And you must have seen Italy," she said at last; "I have often longed to see Italy before I die."

"Nothing to see," said Mrs. Bompas.

"What! nothing to see in Italy?" cried Tom. "Oh, come, Mrs. Bompas, that won't work; I suppose, though, it is not a patch on Golden Hill?"

"A patch? I don't quite——"

"I mean that, side by side with St. Dogwells, Italy would make a poor show?"

Mrs. Bompas did not know, but she knew that the Golden Hill milk—and away she went. She had a way of focussing the conversation on Mrs. Bompas, and unless Mrs. Bompas were discussed, conversation became vague and hypothetical—apt to stray to the tea-table and buttered buns. Golden Hill was part and parcel of Mrs. Bompas, for it was hers—her very own. She looked at the rest of the world through the large end of the telescope: everything else was far away and in miniature. But Golden Hill she could see with the naked eye; it was there, under her very nose, substantial, solid, an all-important reality; she knew all about it, and about it she liked to talk. She entered

into every recent detail in connection with Golden Hill produce categorically. "And, do you know," she said at last, lowering her voice, and glancing over her shoulder, "the hens have almost left off laying. It's a curious thing, but ever since I first trusted Miss Dare with the keys of the hen-house the eggs have become scarcer and scarcer every day."

"The drought," suggested Tom; "you can't lay or do anything else if you're thirsty."

"No, it's not the drought—something worse than that, I fear—Harriet and Alfred both noticed it."

"Noticed what?" asked Tom, rudely, and looking very angry.

"That the eggs began to disappear. They said that in one week there were something like four dozen short."

"Short of what?"—again from Tom.

"Short of what there used to be, of course."

"And do you suppose that Miss Dare could eat four dozen eggs in a week without your noticing it? What did she do with the shells?"

"Exactly," said Mrs. Bompas. "No; she did not eat them, she sold them."

"I don't believe it," exclaimed Tom—"absurd—ridiculous!"

"But Alfred said so—and Harriet."

"I would not believe a word they said, if I were you. It's monstrous; I——"

"But I put some marked eggs in a nest one night, just to see. The next morning—what do you think? —they were gone."

"Without telling either Alfred or Harriet what you had done?" questioned the persistent Tom.

"Why, of course, I told them ; or how——"

"Then that accounts for the milk in the cocoanut," he remarked complacently, "and likewise for its hairy exterior."

"I don't understand," Mrs. Bompas began ; but whether she did or not mattered little, for just then her companion came into the room, and she said "Ahem!" loudly, as if something were tickling her throat.

The Starlings rose out of their chairs and greeted Miss Dare with an effusive show of courtesy, Tom especially shaking hands with her so warmly, and asking her how she was with such apparent anxiety to know, that she was surprised.

"I am very well, thank you," she said, laughing ; "but from your manner I should say you had been talking about me."

The last part of this speech she made with her eyes fixed on her patroness, who blushed profusely and changed the conversation with as much tact as a horse shows which, after throwing his rider and treading on him, gallops to some spot a little further off and begins to graze.

"Seen anything of the Major lately ?" she asked Cicely.

"We see him almost every day," she replied. "He comes regularly every afternoon and stays with his boy until bedtime. Very often he spends an evening with us, too."

She did not think it necessary to add that she and her husband worshipped the Major. He had made himself so popular at Guildhall Villa that they looked

upon him almost as one of the family, and missed him when he stayed away. He had befriended them in a hundred ways. The piano in the drawing-room, the sideboard in the dining-room, many of the pictures, books, nick-nacks in the house were presents from the Major, who in his unobtrusive way seemed to notice all that Guildhall Villa wanted and provided it—for the good of the community, as he said, but really for Tom's or Cicely's exclusive use. She did not think it necessary to explain that he was perpetually asking questions about Edith Dare, making plans for getting her to the house, or arranging pleasure parties in which he thought she could take part. All this she kept to herself, and simply remarked that he was a dear, good fellow.

"Rather a sawny, isn't he, though?" said Mrs. Bompas.

"Yes," said Tom excitedly, "he is a sawny. He has reformed the battery and made it into one of the best in the service; he has sent all the meddlers who used to interfere with him about their business; he has had some whacking big rows with the authorities and won every case he has taken up; he works like a horse; and if every one under him don't work too, he wants to know the reason why; and he's got a devilish awkward way of putting the question to some of 'em. He's an awful sawny, perhaps; but he's the pluckiest chap I ever met, and I only hope I may never have to serve under a worse C. O."

Miss Dare looked across the room at Tom.

"And yet," she said, "he is gentleness itself."

"Gentle!" cried Cicely, "you should see him with that child of his."

"I have," replied Miss Dare shortly, and she lowered her eyes again to the work in her lap.

"It is absurd, all the same," said Mrs. Bompas, "for a man of his age to go about with a baby as if he were a nurse; and I can't help thinking there must be something weak about him."

"He was strong enough," retorted Cicely quickly, "to keep his head in a panic, and fight single-handed against a crowd."

"He was strong enough," said Edith Dare, rising, and moving towards the window, out of which she looked as she went on speaking, "to do a very brave and a very generous thing, and strong enough to forget that he had done it. He is strong enough now," she continued, turning to Cicely and speaking with flashing eyes and clenched hands, "to be able to lift himself high above the motives of this miserable petty place in which he lives, for the sake, I believe, of his boy, and to stand alone, a giant among pygmies; noble enough to forgive them their littleness, grand enough not to despise them, and far too big a man to care a rush what ordinary people think."

She turned to the window again and looked out upon the lawn. They could not see her face.

Had Mrs. Bompas been able to understand the full significance of what was said, her companion would have run small chance of remaining her companion after the end of the current quarter. But she did not understand; she only grasped the facts that Miss Dare was quite unlike any of her predecessors in the way of openness of speech, and that on the present occasion she had expressed herself in very glowing terms about a

gentleman in whom she herself took a certain interest. To hide this interest she twisted the diamond rings on her fat fingers round and round, apparently intent on making them sparkle, and in a tone of all the indifference she could muster, replied—

“ Dear me, Miss Dare, I had no idea you admired him so much ; ” and, by way of showing her general disregard of the subject in her use of the terms she applied to it, continued—“ This thing he did was while he was serving in some non-competent part of the army, too, was it not ?—so Colonel Taplow tells me at least.”

“ Let old Taplow cackle as he likes about what he doesn’t understand,” cried Tom, “ he can’t change a *non-combatant* into a *non-competent*, Mrs. Bompas.”

James Vraille continued to be the subject of debate for some time. He was dull, Mrs. Bompas said ; Cicely, on the contrary, assured her that he could be brilliant on occasion. He was poor company ; he was a clever talker. He was morose and sullen ; he was sociably inclined, and fond of a chat. He talked too little ; there was no stopping him when he once began ; he was even witty and amusing. He was a hundred and fifty things he was not, and was not almost everything he was. The Starlings and Mrs. Bompas were prejudiced each in separate ways ; the former exaggerating his virtues, the latter, from motives of modesty perhaps, pointing out his faults and foibles with a keen appreciation of their number. The girl at the window alone said nothing.

“ And what do you think, Miss Dare ? ” Cicely asked at last.

"I think," Edith replied slowly, "that he is the saddest man I have ever met in my life."

This, then, was the light in which Edith Dare regarded him—the man about whom she had heard so much, and, latterly, seen so often; the man whom all St. Dogwells cordially detested, whom the Starlings called "excellent company, and a dear, good fellow," and whom Mrs. Bompas hoped to bring to her feet with a declaration.

The widow's early confessions, made while her companion was yet a "new broom," and consequently a hot favourite, had doubtless been the cause of Miss Dare's frigidity of manner when she first met him at dinner. He was "making up" to her mistress—in which words her mistress had described Vraille's attitude towards herself—and any man, however great a hero in the past, who could, for the sake of money, "make up" to such a woman, must have lost all sense of self-respect in the present. Until then, perhaps, she had gradually grown almost to despise him; but time had since given her many opportunities of judging for herself, and she had formed her own conclusions both as regarded his "intentions" and his personal character and disposition.

He had committed many enormities. He had quarrelled with the town commissioners, and defied the town council; he had snubbed the people's pride, the worthy Taplow; he had even flouted the great militia colonel himself on the magisterial bench; he had run the gauntlet of the local press in consequence—and he was the saddest man she had ever known. Her opinion, summed up in these few words, differed

from the opinions held by those who thought they knew and understood him best; it differed from the Starlings' estimation, from Mrs. Foresight's, Mrs. Bompas's; it even differed from Uncle Ben's. Were all of them only half right? Had she alone succeeded in touching a key-note which they, with the best endeavours and intentions to strike correctly, had failed to strike at all? Possibly in her heart she felt many things of which she could not speak, but when asked she said she found him the saddest man she had ever known.

Right or wrong, she had hit upon a time which was perhaps the happiest that Jim had known in all his life before. Comparatively speaking he was very happy. Life was beginning to look bright again—very bright and sunny. All was going well with him. He had recently been complimented on his work; he had won all his local battles and was reaping the fruits of them; he was daily associating with a pair of young people whom he liked, and whom he had many opportunities of serving; his child was well and strong, his associates at the fort amused, if they did not very much interest him; and his hours of work and play, duty and pleasure, doled out in fair proportions, occupied his time pleasantly enough. There was but one small cloud in the serene sky of his contentment: Uncle Ben's health had failed him more and more, until he had become to a certain extent an invalid; but then he had gone to the south of France, where he would be certain, so the doctors said, to recover. Altogether, as the autumn advanced, Jim became a changed and happier man.

"My luck," he said one day to Cicely Starling, "has not been particularly good through life, you know, but now I do really believe it is on the turn."

Astute old Jim! He thought to deceive little Mrs. Starling, as he tried to deceive himself, by talking gaily of his battery, his child, the horses he was going to buy, the hunting he was going to do, and so forth, and so lead her to believe, as he led himself to believe, that in these simple pleasures he suddenly took delight, and that in them lay his new-found happiness. Cicely knew better, or, at least, thought she did.

"If," she said to Tom, "we could only fit out the Major with a really nice wife, who would be kind to him, and look after him and his boy, and try to understand him, what a thoroughly good fellow we could make of him."

"If pigs had wings, Cis, perhaps they would fly," Tom replied. "Jimmy isn't the sort of chap to marry—again."

However, Cicely, with true womanly instinct, as well as true womanly propensity (all women like match-making, though few understand how to procure the proper ingredients), waylaid Edith Dare on all occasions, and brought her, with or against her will, to Guildhall Villa, where, as Tom remarked, the Major talked "literature, science, politics, and art with her, till all was blue," and seemed to enjoy himself.

Sly old Jim!

He knew of a little sandy cove on the sea-shore among the rocks where Mrs. Bompas was in the habit of sending her children to "paddle;" he knew, moreover, that

Harriet was generally too busy in the house to take the young Bompases herself, and that the duty usually fell to Miss Dare ; he knew that salt water was supposed to be good for young legs, and he saw no reason why little Jim should not paddle as well as other children. So he very often took little Jim with him to that sandy cove in the cool of the evening to initiate him into the mysteries and delights of paddling.

This treat, which had almost superseded the “ponee-ancart,” was afforded Master Jim whenever the weather would allow ; he and Miss Starling would be taken by Judith in the pony-cart to the top of the cliffs, where it was Vraille’s custom to meet them and carry them down to the beach in his arms. Sometimes Cicely, sometimes Tom, often both of them, would join the party, and they would all pic-nic among the rocks, taking the appurtenances of tea with them.

The summer was far advanced, and the long-looked-for rain had been pouring down incessantly for ten long days—during which little Jim had asked repeatedly to be taken for “a pallell in er sea,” but had necessarily been confined to the house—when the clouds suddenly dispersed, the sky again became a canopy of blue, and early one morning the sun blazed forth the announcement, through the window blinds of Jim’s barrack-room, that the day had come at last for an excursion to the cove.

The afternoon fulfilled the morning’s promise, and off went Jim, as soon as his work was done, to make his arrangements, fully as eager for the treat as he knew his son would be.

True to time, he met the little party at the top of

the cliff and dexterously picked the children out of the pony-cart.

"Come on, old boy," he cried ; "come on, little Cis ; we'll all paddle to our hearts' content to-day. Got the tea, Judith ? That's the style. You bring along the kettle and basket ; I'll see to the chicks. Now then," he shouted, when he had told his man-servant, who was in attendance, the time to bring the pony-cart back for them ; "now then ; off we go!" And with a child upon each arm he picked his way down the zig-zag path leading to the beach, crying—"Gee-up, old hoss ; gently over the stones. Here we go, Cis ; here we go, Jim, my bonny boy ; hurray for a pallell and a jolly tea !" as gaily as any idiotic Major in her Majesty's land forces ever spoke in the course of a long service on the active, half-pay, and retired lists, taken all together.

"Take off me oos an' 'ocks, daddee," commanded little Jim peremptorily, as he took a violent seat on the shingle.

"Take off me oos an' 'ockings, p'ease, Mage-rail," lisped Miss Cissy as she leant carefully back against a rock.

"Boys and girls," said Jim to himself, kneeling in the sand, regardless of his "nice new blue serge suit," as Cicely Starling had called it ; "boys and girls—girls first, boys afterwards ; socks and stockings ; early disregard of personal appearance, and early respect for dress ; signs of carelessness and symptoms of vanity ; boys and girls—all the world over, just the same. As it was in the beginning, so, I suppose, it will go on and on, to the end of time—if time has an end. There, away you go !"

"Come 'long, ickle Cis ; take me hand, me lead oo."

"Just as I said," Jim soliloquised, as he watched the tiny pair totter hand in hand towards the Ocean ; "human nature beginning all over again where human nature left off; we shall never get any further. Man takes the lead even in infancy ; it is his prerogative. Nature has imbued him with the instinct : woman yields and submits to his guidance, or should do so according to all tradition. But then, according to tradition it is *she* who leads *him*—to a Fall."

"Iz oo comin' too, daddee ?" asked little Jim, looking round.

"Yes, I'm coming, old chap ;" and he followed Judith and the children down to the water's edge.

But this was not enough for the boy. "Take off *ore* oos an' 'ocks, too," he said, "an' come an' pallell in er boofful sea wiz me an' ickle Cis."

"All right," said Jim ; "I'll come to-morrow. I've got a bone in my leg to-day."

This amply satisfied the child, who went on digging and splashing and admonishing little Cicely under the superintendence of Judith and paid no further attention to his unfortunate father—cut off from a similar enjoyment by the bone in his leg.

"He is what he is," thought Vraille, who always evinced an inclination to moralize when he looked at the sea ; "he enjoys the sight of a pebble, a piece of seaweed, a bucket and spade, and all the finite things of childhood. And I, a man, look upon the sky and the sea and speculate on infinity—feel the infinity within myself, know that it is in him as well, and that he too one day will feel it—and wonder."

"Oh, the end of all philosophy," he said aloud, "leads nowhere—or, at least, only back to the same starting-point. We look out on the world and see that it is wonderful—too wonderful for us to understand, and we are driven back on a Primary Cause—we have to confess to ourselves we know nothing at all about it. Let us enjoy and be content. Nature is beautiful; let us, at least, not spoil her handiwork with what we call civilisation!"

"You forget," said a gentle voice behind him, "that Nature is cruel and red-handed"—he turned sharply and confronted Mrs. Bompas's companion—"and is continually waging a pitiless war against life. Civilisation helps us to fight her."

Yes; for the moment, perhaps, he had forgotten it.

Her words were hard words, but her voice as she spoke them was soft and kind, and very sweet to listen to, Jim thought. It both soothed and caressed him; it urged him to answer; it excited his interest; it drew him out of himself; and yet it made him feel, somehow, that were he silent he would still be understood. For a moment or two he was silent as he stood looking at her, but not with the feeling that his thoughts were being read. She was dressed in a loose grey cotton gown with a black band round her slim waist, and he felt half inclined to tell her that beauty meant simplicity, but thought that such a speech might be personal and rude. Her arms hung loosely by her side, and her hands, gloveless and ringless, clasped the ends of a child's wooden spade. Form, he nearly said, but restrained himself, needs no ornament. Then he looked into her face; it was a plain, honest, square

face, but what was it that prevented it from being an ordinary face? The breeze caught her hair, and a wavy tress floated out into the air from under her black straw hat. His eyes followed its flutterings, and as he was trying to make up his mind whether he would call its colour dark or light, she caught it in her hand, and, with a little laugh, tucked it behind her ear. And just then Gwendoline Bompas came running towards them with a little pink sea-shell in her hand. Edith Dare bent her head to look. He lost sight of the ear; but he could see the shell.

"You have won that girl's confidence," he said abruptly, when Gwendoline had joined her brother Algernon.

"I think so," she replied.

"And you have bridled that brute of a boy"—he was looking at the children, who were divesting themselves of their shoes and stockings quietly and amicably enough. He had often remarked the growing change in their behaviour to the Starlings, but never before to Edith Dare. "How did you do it?" he went on; "you said you would, I remember, and you seem to have succeeded. Is there a charm about you?—tell me, is there a charm about you which can change natures and characters? I do not wish to be rude, but, do you know, I think there is."

"You think a great deal more than you ought," she replied lightly; "you are always thinking."

"Am I?" he said simply; "perhaps I am. Freedom of thought is a blessing, I suppose; but it is a curse too. Mind is a fatal gift, always tearing you in opposite directions—backward with regret, forward

with apprehension ; that is, the mature mind that feels so much more than it knows. Look at those little children ; if we all had freedom of speech as well, what a very different place this world would be ! ”,

“ But, surely, we do have it.”

“ I don’t, anyway, Miss Edith ; generally I am tongue-tied, or feel the truth of the trite saying that speech was given us to conceal our thoughts.” Neither he nor she seemed to notice the transition from “ Miss Dare ” to “ Miss Edith.” “ But perhaps the time will come,” he went on thoughtfully, “ when man will learn that his highest claim to honour is the possession of the power to speak aloud what is in him.”

“ You mean,” she said, looking at him earnestly, “ that you very seldom get a chance of saying what you really think ? ”

“ Or of talking about what really interests me—but, somehow, you, a comparative stranger, seem to have skimmed the cream of my thoughts. How have you done it ? ” he asked, laughing.

The children were busily and happily engaged making themselves and their clothes wet and dirty ; Judith was superintending. Jim and Edith Dare, with their minds free from the care of responsibility, soon became absorbed in one another’s conversation. Whenever they met it was the same ; they fell naturally into the discussion of subjects they would not have dreamed of broaching in other society.

She, seated on a low ledge of rock, looked down upon the grey-haired man lying at her feet ; he, with his head bare and his earnest face upturned to hers, talked on and on unrestrainedly.

"No amount of talking," she said with a smile, "will ever answer the question, 'What is life?'"

"And no amount of thinking," he replied, "will lead us a step nearer to truth. Life is, and must always remain, a muddle and a puddle. We cannot understand it. We cannot see to the bottom of it. It is finite, and yet infinite; it is simple and yet inexplicably complex." He paused awhile, as if uncertain whether to proceed, and then with a sort of sudden determination went on, "I thought when I first came to this place that I had got into the most ridiculous and at the same time the most detestable corner of the globe in which a man could qualify for a lunatic asylum. I had no one to talk to, and nothing to do but to think. I was miserable—miserable. You said just now that I thought too much. There was a time when thought was rapidly leading me into an all-round disbelief in everything. I went on arguing and arguing with myself, until I had well-nigh argued away faith and hope, and, I may as well add, charity. Some of my disbeliefs shocked and staggered me, and I saw that that way madness lay. I have come out of that struggle—as I went in—ignorant and alone, but, I hope, with my soul cleansed. The great questions—*Why?* *Whence?* *Whitherward?*—came upon me late in life, perhaps, but when they did, they struck me with their full force. You know my story; you know how I was deceived and left. It was not that—hundreds of men have had harder things to bear—no, it was not that; it was the feeling of isolation, of utter solitude. Look at that boy. Do you wonder why I love him? He saved me from despair; and now, it seems, all that

I had lost—energy, vitality, hope, ambition even—are revived in him—they are all centred in him. Contemptible as this sleepy hollow of a place may be, I do not so much mind it now. After all, it is only the world in miniature."

"We are automata," she said; "our customs soon become crystallised into habits. That is the pity of it. You are wasted here, but have ceased to mind it."

"Wasted! My whole life would have been wasted but for him. It has been full of mistakes as it is—full of regret. It is my nature to repent. I spend half my time repenting what I do in the other half. It is very hard, I think, to be a happy man, and I am afraid I was never intended to be one."

"No; only fools are happy; only fools who never think—who are incapable of thought—really enjoy life. I believe that. We have each our own burdens; but do not some of us take such infinite pains to strap them on to our backs that nothing will loose them?"

"Ah! That is one of the great mysteries of being—that responsibility of the inner self. Why are we so created? Why is life, quite apart from life's surroundings and accessories, made so hard for some, so easy for others? Sheep have no inner sheep."

"And most men are but sheep, following one another. You should rejoice in being able to strike out a line of your own."

"But am I able? And if I am, and get the praise of men for it, or their censure, that makes no difference to me. It is part of my creed that the leopard cannot change his spots; and a man cannot alter his character."

As a certain ‘ring’ is the property of certain metals when struck, so, I suppose, is a certain specific kind of response the tribute we each pay under the varying but definite tests applied by the circumstances of our lives from day to day. Some things anger me and I show anger; some things melt me to pity, and I show pity; many—oh, very many things that I see and hear fill me with contempt: the contempt I feel for the people I meet makes me ashamed of myself. But through all these phases the I—that I which I alone seem to know—never really alters. It is the I that, for one thing, lacks self-confidence.”

“I don’t believe it,” she exclaimed; “I mean I don’t believe it is self-confidence you lack, but self-conceit. It is only through a long course of morbid introspection that you have come to think like this. All you want is congenial companionship, encouragement, sympathy. You are as strong—aye, stronger far than your fellow-men.”

“Work is what I want, hard work.”

“Yes, work, and a little hope. And things are fairly well balanced in that way; hope comes quickest to those who most readily despond.”

He did not answer, but looked up at her quickly. Her face was turned away, and she was intent on the pattern she was drawing on the sand with the wooden spade she held. Her speech, then, meant nothing; and after gazing at her for some time in silence, he withdrew his eyes.

“It is the loneliness of it all,” he said.

“Yes, it is the loneliness of it all,” she repeated, bending forward and resting her arms upon her knees.

"It is the loneliness of it all." Her voice was low and full of sadness.

"That is like me," he exclaimed excitedly, "like my selfishness. Here have I been talking away about myself when I might have known that your life is probably ten times more lonely than my own. Perhaps you have no kind friends—no Uncle Ben to turn to; perhaps you have never known a Doctor Dick. Poor Miss Dare, you have not even a little Jim."

"In all my lifetime, Major Vraille, I have never had the sympathy, the kindness, the consideration, the goodness you have shown me in the last few months."

Then she told him her simple story, shortly—a commonplace story of inappreciation at home, dulness outside of home; a life of seeming comfort and real indigence, ending in absolute poverty and dependence. "I have no relations," she concluded, "in a position to provide for me, even if I could bring myself to live upon charity. I had a chance once of becoming a concert singer, but I refused it. In that way I could have earned money, and independence of a sort, but I dreaded the publicity, and so took to teaching children and 'companionship' old ladies."

"And pure chance brought you here?"

She hesitated a moment before she answered, "Yes, of course, pure chance."

Then both were silent.

The breeze carried the sounds of merry little voices along with it and bore them on and away, unnoticed—neither spoke. It caught the vagrant tress of Edith's hair again and toyed with it; but this time

Jim did not see its wavy flutterings ; he was looking out to sea ; it whispered to them both, but neither seemed to heed.

Then, speaking slowly, he said, more to himself than to her—"It began from a sense of duty ; little did I think it would end in so much pleasure. But you must go away from this place. I have seen enough to convince me that life at Golden Hill must be intolerable."

"No, no," she interrupted quickly. "I don't wish to leave. I am happy enough, believe me."

"I cannot believe you ; you are the sort of woman who would suffer martyrdom in silence. One day, some time ago now"—he lowered his voice and spoke very softly—"a little child, a child who knows no falsehood or exaggeration, told me that he had seen—had seen Miss Dare cry. Very few people, I think, have seen that."

She did not answer.

"Forgive me," he went on, "for saying what I have said ; but I cannot bear—— We must try and get you away. You are offended ?" he said quickly, looking up ; "I am sorry."

"No, no—anything but that. What can I say ? How am I to thank you for this interest in me ? Why should you take any ?"

"Because I have never met any one——" And there he stopped, biting his lip, and abruptly added—"but all that's neither here nor there." (Surely, as Lucy in days gone by had often enough remarked, he knew nothing of flirtation, and had an awkward manner with women.)

"Your natural kindness of heart leads you to exaggerate," she said. "My troubles are insignificant, and diminishing every day. The children are not really vicious, no children are."

"I believe that," said Jim reverentially.

"And little Jim must have caught me in a fit of annoyance, or a pet."

"Were you in a pet, then, when you met him accidentally in the street and bent over his perambulator to speak to him?"

"I forget," she said, laughing; "very possibly I was."

"I don't believe it. I only believe you are too proud to confess yourself unhappy. Apart from the children, those horrible servants, and Mrs. Bompas herself——"

Edith Dare smiled. "She is only very, very silly," she said.

"But that is the danger! Silly, foolish people work more mischief in the world than out-and-out knaves. I believe," he continued impressively, "that she who was once my wife will in time become a Mrs. Bompas of the worst sort. That is what I have been spared; that is what I should wish to see you spared —living with such a woman."

"Not yet," she answered; "not just yet."

"Do not, however, run away with the false impression that I hate these people, or would wish them ill. Sincerely, I think it is only pity I feel for them. They cannot help the manufacture of their brains any more than they can that of their legs. We are forced, out of pity, to tolerate, but we are not obliged to live with

them. You must not continue to live where you are ; it is not right. You must go."

"Not yet," she repeated ; "not just yet."

Mrs. Bompas was continually confiding in her ; Mrs. Bompas hardly allowed a day to pass without telling her of some fresh attention paid by Major Vraille, of some fresh indication of his infatuation. She had to listen. And now for the first time she heard, although she had long ago inferred, the true state of Major Vraille's feelings.

But others, who were not so quick at drawing inferences, and who, moreover, had not been honoured with his confidence, looked down upon the pic-nic party from the road overhead, and drew their own conclusions from what they saw.

"I wonder whether Mrs. Bompas has any idea of what is going on ?" said Mrs. Taplow.

"None in the world, I'll be bound !" replied the Colonel.

They watched the pair for some little time intently, taking in every detail, and only desisted when they heard footsteps coming along the road and saw the Starlings approaching the zig-zag path down to the cove.

"Hallo, Starling !" shouted the Colonel airily, "going to find the children, eh ? Here they are, all down here, and Miss Dare and Major with them. About time you came, I think. Good night !"

When Jim presently caught sight of the Starlings descending the zig-zag path, he did not look in the least embarrassed, but hailed them with a glad shout. Then, turning to Edith Dare he said, "I promised your father I would befriend you if I

could. Will you promise me, in turn, that you will let me know at once if you are in need of help? I am afraid you are unhappy, though you will not admit it. You say you do not wish to leave Mrs. Bompas yet; when, in time, you do wish to do so will you tell me?"

"Yes," she said, as the Starlings came up to them, "I will—I promise."

It was a happy day for "poor old Jimmy," as Tom sometimes called his Major. All was going well with him; all was as it should be. He made himself useful in handing round tea-cups and plates; he smiled contentedly upon every one and everything; he stroked his son's curly head and fed him with bread and butter; he leaned forward politely towards Miss Edith Dare whenever she made a remark, which "inclinations" Cicely's quick eye noticed.

The children went back to the fascinating sea for a last dabble in it; Judith followed them; Jim's eyes followed her.

"A good woman—a really good woman," he said, catching Edith's glance.

"Even Mrs. Bompas calls her a 'respectable creature,'" said Cicely mischievously. She liked, as she said, to draw the Major out.

"Some words of approbation are insults!" he burst out. "Respectable! Mrs. Bompas should never try to praise; she does not understand the meaning of praise—some people don't. Respectable! A selfless woman, the ideal of what is most beautiful in feminine nature—a woman raised as high above the rich lady as the eagle in the air above the bat in the barn—a jewel

compared to a flagstone, excepting the usefulness of the flagstone. Respectable—bah! It is part of the hypocrisy of this canting age. I hate the word respectability!"

They "drew him out" to good purpose for the next half-hour. With his long legs stretched out before him, a pipe in his mouth, his back against a rock, he descanted upon many subjects, great and small, trivial and serious, showing—to those who understood him—his contentment with his surroundings in his enthusiasm of speech. No one but Edith Dare cared to answer him.

"You have power, Major Vraille," she said at length; "do you not feel it in yourself, and the responsibility of it?"

"I?"—and he blushed. Yes, that was what he had half felt sometimes, but had supposed that the feeling was due to conceit or vanity. Now, for the first time in his life, some one accused him—it seemed like an accusation—of having a gift which he never used. "Have I power?"—the others were not listening—"Is that so? Sometimes I have thought it—and then that little child has smiled upon me and made me feel my impotence. But it must be so. You, too, have power; definite power in your art. Mine, if I have any, is latent; it is like steam in a boiler without a safety-valve, surging up and bubbling and seething within me, struggling to find vent, forced back upon itself, useless. Oh, if before the end I might be allowed to build up some monument that would remain in the hereafter to prove—not my worth; indeed not that—but my efforts to strive in the right

direction. There comes an end, and we are forgotten. We pass away out of sight, and leave nothing behind. For what purpose has it all been? If there be power in me, then God grant that I may be allowed to use it to some purpose—such as making many others happy. But see, whom have I, with my weak, selfish nature, to make happy—only that little child. And he, as he grows older and older, gains strength and vigour, shoots up from the baby into the boy, from the boy into the man, lessens with each advancing day my hold upon him; severs himself more and more from my control; learns to beat out his own path—as he must do, poor little fellow—and eventually becomes another such as I am, to begin where I left off. Oh, that he could remain the baby that he is until I die!"

"A terrible prayer," she replied softly.

Ah, a terrible prayer indeed! He had sunk (or risen?) from a condition of active ambition to one of hazy doubt and speculation. The pomp and vanity of war; the glitter and sparkle and dash of his profession, with its thrust and push, its "one-against-all" struggle for advancement, or advertisement, had long since faded from that picture of perfection he had painted on his imagination when a boy. Only the sense of *duty* remained; the strong, earnest desire to carry out what he felt was right, to defeat what he conceived to be wrong. He knew himself to be an impossible man—a dreamer, a useless member of society; he knew that were he asked to define his idea of the acme of happiness, he could only reply, "sympathy." Were he called upon to epitomise his hope in the present,

and his ambition in the future, the cry would go up from his heart of hearts, “My boy, my boy !”

The world and society would be better off if such men were not. They are a nuisance ; they are no good —only a constant source of anxiety to their friends, if they have any, and a perpetual trouble to themselves. But they do exist, though they cannot be said to live—for they understand life too well in the knowledge of their utter ignorance of its mysteries, in the too-ready perception of its frauds, the contempt for its frivolities, to *live*—and they struggle on, never advancing, never succeeding ; tossed from one sphere of society into another, unrecognised in any ; battered by the world’s blows, which make serious impressions on them ; at last, travel-stained and way-worn, to succumb, when society—with a sigh—exclaims, “And a good thing too !”

Looming clouds broke up the little party, and scattered it in several directions. Jim sent Judith on in the pony-cart with the children ; Tom and Cicely, he and Mr. Wilkes, followed. The master was as silent as the dog. He was thinking of all that had been said—of Edith’s words, “hope comes soonest to those who most readily despair.” Did they mean anything ? Was his future after all to be bright, and cheerful, full of contentment, if not of bliss and happiness ? His wife that had been would, in a week or two, so he heard, become the wife of another and more fascinating man than himself. Was he free to choose again, with his instincts all sharpened by experience ? and, if so, would any right-minded girl or woman accept his choice ?

He sat in the little room next to his child’s bedroom

while Judith was putting the boy to bed. He was waiting to go in and bid the little fellow good-night before returning to the mess, there to listen to the chatter about horses and races and yachts and such-like little matters, which after his baby's prattle always seemed to him so senseless. At his feet snored Mr. Wilkes, faithful, always faithful—grim and ugly as Judith herself, who presently tapped at the door and announced that all was ready. Outside the rain was pouring down in torrents. It was a wretched evening after a beautiful, happy day: the barometer and Jim's spirits had fallen together.

"'Ook, daddee dear," said little Jim as his father entered the room, "pitty ickle picter Lalla gave me."

Vraille leant over the boy's cot and looked at a detestable coloured print of a very solemn subject—Christ on His way to Calvary. The boy was delighted with it, and held it up close to Jim's face, making several remarks upon it.

"I think, Judith," said Vraille, "if you do not mind, that it would be better to keep the sadder part of the story of our faith from the child until he is a little older. Teach him the simple portions of it if you will, but not its horrors—no, not its horrors—not yet."

"Lord love yer, sir!" said Judith. "I meant no harm givin' it to 'im, an' never thought there was none. He's very fond o' that there picture—I'll take it from 'im termorer," she whispered, "since yer wishes it; but he wouldn't let me now—and," she continued aloud, "he knows all about it. Tell daddee what it is, sweetheart."

"Poor man cumble down," said little Jim in a slow tone of deep condolence, rather than of reverence.

Vraille winced.

"An' why did the poor man tumble down?" asked Judith, intent only on parading her pupil's knowledge.

"Cause his cross—too heavy; cross too heavy, daddee dear."

"That will do," said Jim; "take it from him now, Judith, and let us say good-night."

And then he went out into the rain, Mr. Wilkes following close upon his heels.

CHAPTER VI.

RESOLUTIONS.

MRS. BOMPAS, to her horror and disgust, discovered, through Colonel Taplow, that her companion was flirting with Major Vraille. She was justly incensed, and sought further evidence of Harriet, who supplied her with all that was necessary to complete the proof. Still, Mrs. Bompas had "nothing to go upon," and she did not tax the girl with her offence, but sought to terminate their connection on other and more conclusive, not to say less embarrassing, pretexts. But this was not so easy. The hen-house fable about the falling off of the eggs turned out a failure; and Mrs. Bompas was at her wits' end for an excuse to dismiss "the wretch" who had dared to come between her and her affections, when Harriet and Alfred together, with very long faces, came to her and unfolded a terrible tale of duplicity and crime.

Off went Mrs. Bompas with it to Cicely Starling.

"What *do* you think?" she said, "one of Gwendoline's new silk frocks and a pearl bracelet of my own have been found in Miss Dare's box!"

"Who found them there?" asked Cicely.

"Harriet."

"And had Harriet your orders to search Miss Dare's box?"

"No; certainly not, nothing of the sort. I was taken entirely by surprise. What shall I do?"

"Give Harriet in charge of the police," said Cicely; "she put them there."

"Why, Harriet has lived with me for the past—for a great number of years," exclaimed Mrs. Bompas, recollecting herself just in time; "and I trust her as I would myself. No, no; I have had my suspicions for weeks past, and rather than be robbed, I shall give Miss Dare her warning and her wages, and tell her to go without waiting for the end of the quarter."

"Without giving her your reasons?" cried Cicely. "Oh, surely, Mrs. Bompas, that would be hardly fair."

"Why should I give her any reason, except that she don't suit? If I did, there would be a fuss, and policemen in the house, and all sorts of things."

Argument with Mrs. Bompas was as effective as argument with the east wind. She came to Mrs. Starling ostensibly for advice, really with her mind made up. She left with her intentions as fixed as ever; but her courage somewhat failed her when she came to consider how best to put her resolution into effect. Miss Dare was no ordinary governess; not a Miss Meek, in fact. Mrs. Bompas rather feared her "companion;" and as she neared her house, her courage oozed away more and more rapidly. But an interview with Harriet reassured her, and she decided to dismiss Edith Dare without loss of time as "incompetent to teach, and devoid of lady-like instinct" (though she framed the phrase differently in her mind), reserving her real reason for the written "character" she would assuredly be called upon to give at some

future date by Miss Dare's next employer. For Mrs. Bompas was, of course, an honourable woman ; she thoroughly believed Harriet's story ; and though she was reluctant to repeat it to her whom it most concerned, dreading the possibility of police interference and its attendant unpleasantness, she was determined that no other lady should be subjected to such treatment as that of which she had been the victim ; and, come what might, her duty as an honest woman was paramount. There were reasons why she was exceedingly glad to dismiss the girl, but they were not those for which the girl was to be dismissed.

"Miss Dare," she said, when the pair were next alone, "I have put into this envelope your wages to the end of the quarter ; and as I have decided to do without a companion for the future, I should be glad if you could conveniently suit yourself with another home as soon as possible, only I must ask you not to apply to me for a character."

She had carefully thought out this little speech and had committed it to memory. It was, she flattered herself, exceedingly neat and to the point. It never occurred to her that her announcement might be considered somewhat sudden, seeing that its purport had never even been hinted at before ; nor, having decided upon the words she intended to use, did she deem it expedient to preface them with any introductory remarks. She felt just a little nervous, and her nervousness increased as Edith Dare looked at her in blank surprise without making the slightest movement toward the envelope held out to her. This in itself was embarrassing ; her outstretched arm was

converted into an awkward-looking, meaningless sort of finger-post ; and after a faltering quaver or two it fell helplessly into her lap, when Miss Dare, with a very quiet smile, said—

“ And may I ask, Mrs. Bompas, what has led you to this sudden decision, and why I am not to apply to you for a character, as you term it ? ”

Willingly, at that moment, would the poor widow have exchanged a dozen pearl bracelets for a tenth part of the other's composure. She turned very red in the face, and looked at the carpet, caught sight of her feet and drew them within her skirts ; she shifted her position, pretending to rearrange her sofa-cushions ; she fidgeted, but could not make herself comfortable.

“ Oh, things I have heard,” she stammered out, at last, blundering into the mistake of all others she most wished to avoid ; “ no, not that either ; not quite up to managing the children, I mean—educating them, I should say ; that is, hardly the sort of companion, you know, required by a lady of any position. I think it best, at all events, that we should part.”

“ Your reasons appear somewhat complicated, Mrs. Bompas ; and, for the sake of simplicity, will you kindly take one of them at a time ? What have you heard about me ? ”

The directness of the question, the girl's polite manner and her smile, instead of calming the good lady, threw her completely off her balance.

“ Things that I do not intend to repeat—they have nothing to do with it.”

“ Then I must apologize,” replied Edith, bowing, “ for having mistaken your meaning. I thought that,

possibly, Colonel Taplow or Harriet or Alfred—you know their tattling tendencies as well as I do myself; better perhaps—might have influenced you; but since you say that gossip has *nothing to do with it*—I think that was your expression—of course the word of a *gentlewoman* suffices. Incompetence and want of polish—those are my faults? I regret them extremely; and am very sorry. There is little else, I think, to be said. Do I understand that I shall put you to no inconvenience if I make arrangements to leave at once?"

Mrs. Bompas intimated her opinion that the sooner she left the better; when, to her astonishment, Miss Dare simply bowed and left the room, noiselessly closing the door behind her.

News in a place of St. Dogwells' dimensions does not take long to circulate, especially if it happens to contain an unpleasant flavour. Within a very little time it was the talk of the town that Mrs. Bompas had given her governess summary warning. Cicely, knowing what she did, positively dreaded meeting Edith Dare, yet longed to help her if she could. She told Tom the whole story and asked him what she had better do.

"Accuse her of theft behind her back, and never give her a chance of explaining!" he exclaimed. "Impossible, there must be some mistake. However, find out, Cis, all you can from the girl herself, without letting her know what Mrs. Bompas told you."

So Cicely wrote a little note to Edith Dare asking her to come to Guildhall Villa as soon as she could do so alone.

Days elapsed, but at last she came and told her side of the story.

"I cannot discover who has anything to say about me, unless it be that horrible woman Harriet. I thought I could get to the bottom of it all, and put myself right before I left ; but they are too many for me. Mrs. Bompas will not speak to me even to say good-morning. What can I do ? I thought I had a fairly brave spirit for a woman ; but they are breaking it, breaking it, Cis dear, out of pure malice, it seems. They want me gone. Even as I left the house to-day, Harriet asked me with a sneer if I were coming back."

"Never will I go to Golden Hill again or speak to Mrs. Bompas, no, never !" said Cicely, in tears, holding her friend's hand in hers. " You must leave the place, Edith ; it is not right that you should stay there another day."

"I can leave when I like—without a character ; and, even so, it will be a happy release, as they say when afflicted people die. But then what am I to do ? I have no money to waste on hotel bills, even if I could go to one alone ; no roof to cover me ; no friends, Cis, no prospects now, of getting such another situation, nothing."

"Stay here, Edith, stay here," cried Cicely, the tears running down her rosy cheeks.

Edith did not cry.

"You are very, very good to me," she said. "What am I to answer ? I have no one to go to for help ; but I cannot——"

"There is a box-room upstairs we can turn out, if you don't mind sleeping next the roof," Cicely inter-

rupted, "and, dear, it would be such a pleasure." She ran out of the room to see, as she said, what could be done.

And so it was arranged quickly and quietly, as kind-hearted little women do arrange things for those they love and pity. The two women separated in peace and with kisses; but when Tom presently came home and heard of the day's doings, flustering began in earnest.

"What an infernal shame!" he cried. "That woman should be hanged, drawn, and quartered; nothing short of physical pain would make *her* feel—the cad! Put Miss Dare up? I should just think so; for as long as ever she likes to stay. Oh, Lord, whatever will the Major say? It'll drive him silly."

The Major had to be told; and the Starlings found themselves in a very awkward position. Edith had been dismissed, as she herself believed, for general incompetence and on account of tittle-tattle, the purport of which she had not been told and could not discover for herself; but they were behind the scenes and knew that a far more serious charge had been alleged against her. What should they do? How act for the best?

In this dilemma they decided to do nothing, but to lay the case before James Vraille and abide by his decision.

"No," said Tom; "we had better not tell Miss Dare anything until we have consulted with him; he'll set us right, and, by Jove, he's the boy to see justice done."

They could hear his heavy footfall overhead as he danced about the nursery floor, playing with his

baby ; they could hear little Jim's laughter, and Judith's deep-toned merriment. They heard the latch of the wicket at the top of the stairs drawn back and a little voice call out—

“Don't go 'way, daddee dear ; oh dear, oh dear, daddee's goin' 'way—boo-hoo ! boo-hoo !” followed by a long, deep wail of piteous lament.

“My boy, my little chap,” came a whispering voice in answer, “I must go now—hush ! hush, my man, I really must ; some day we'll have a house all our very own, you and I and Lalla, and I'll never go away. Take him, Judith. I *must* go.”

“We cannot tell him now,” said Tom.

“No ; better not ; to-morrow,” his little wife replied.

So on the morrow Cicely followed her guest to the converted box-room, and told her that Tom's last word of command had been, “Stand fast, and await further orders from the Major.”

Miss Dare's trunks had just arrived, and she was unpacking them. She desisted for a moment while Cicely was speaking, and then, without answering, plunged her arm into the open box before her and drew out from the bottom of it a leather writing-case.

“This, Cicely,” she said, “was my father's ; he had it with him when he died. It was afterwards sent to me. In one of the pockets of it I found—this.”

She held a slip of yellow, time-worn paper in her hand, and unfolding it she read out—“‘Statement of my account with Vraille ;’” and then followed a number of dates and figures, in various sums of rupees, all of which she read carefully, one after another, deducting each amount from the last balance as she went along.

"This is evidently," she said at last, "a statement, showing when and in what instalments a considerable debt was paid off—or almost paid off, for the last entry is—'Still due—400 rupees.' Do you understand? My father, when he died, owed Major Vraille about 35*l.* I feel certain he lent that money, prompted by some very generous impulse. It has never been wholly paid off, so far as I can gather. It is still due; it is a debt *I* still owe Major Vraille. He is not the sort of man one can approach on money matters—anything sordid does not belong to, and cannot easily be brought into, the atmosphere that surrounds *him*—and I cannot, I cannot put the question to him. Probably he has totally forgotten the circumstance. However, I feel compelled to refund that money, and how am I to do it now? He is a difficult man to lie to; but I was forced into telling him a half-lie the other day, when he asked me if pure chance brought me to this place. Not altogether, Cis. The opportunity occurred; I seized it, thinking it would clear my path of this difficulty. It has not done so—I am as far from my object as ever. I must begin again—from the beginning. Oh, if he only knew!"

"Let me tell him, then," said the simple-minded Cicely, only too anxious to help her friend.

"Never," cried Edith, jumping to her feet; "never—do you suppose that I would have confided in you had I thought you were not to be trusted?—never! Promise, Cicely, faithfully, or I leave this house tonight and walk—yes, walk to London and go on the stage. I mean what I say."

Little Mrs. Starling, as she gave her promise, began

to think her lot in St. Dogwells was cast among the most extraordinary people with the most extraordinary views. The Major's eccentricities were difficult enough to understand; but here was a woman who seemed bent on out-Vrailling Vraille.

"Half-confidence is worse than no confidence at all," Edith continued, "so—remember, I trust you—look here." She dived into her box again, and presently produced a roll of foolscap paper. "This," she said, holding it up, "is the copy of my father's letter, recommending Major Vraille for the Victoria Cross. I have told you all about that before; but I have never told any one of the little slip of paper I found inside the packet, when it was forwarded to me. Here it is. Now listen—

"To any member of Colonel Dare's family into whose hands this official letter may fall.—James Vraille saved his life, and behaved most gallantly under very difficult circumstances. This recommendation for the V.C. will, in all probability, not be entertained. He is not a man to push his own interests. He deserves the reward; help him to it—it is his due.—R. D."

"Oh, your father wrote that, thinking he might die," said Cicely.

"My father's Christian name did not begin with R. No; I do not know who wrote it."

"I do," Cicely exclaimed excitedly—"Richard Doyle!"

"Ah, yes, it might have been he. I did not know he was with Major Vraille at the time. Well, anyway, as *I* was the only member of Colonel Dare's family

interested, the appeal was of very little use. I sent the packet, just as I received it, with a letter of my own—the best I could write—to the War Office. It was returned with a memorandum in a clerk's handwriting, to the effect that the question had been finally settled in the negative long before and could not be reopened. I never told Major Vraille. Do you know, Cicely, that my father behaved very unjustly to him when they were serving together many years ago in England? Do you know—yes, you do now—that ever since that time he has been our benefactor? He came to me the other day and besought me to ask his help before any other person's, if ever I needed help. Proud as I am, I would do so—and there is not another person in the world to whom I could go, under similar conditions. But there is nothing mean or paltry about *him*; there are no after considerations or under-currents with *him*; he is such a gentleman, Cicely. There; now you may tell him anything you like, except about that money; that is a matter between me and him only, to be settled, one way or another, some day."

So that evening the Starlings button-holed the Major, and the trio held a solemn conclave.

He listened fairly quietly until all had been explained, and then burst out with—

"It makes my blood boil to listen to—to think of. That such things are possible is enough to make a man bow his head in shame for his fellow-creatures. We arrogate to ourselves the primary position in creation; we boast of possessing souls, and speak contemptuously of animals as only endowed with

instinct. Look at that dog. If only he could understand what his masters and mistresses *can* do, he would never follow one faithfully again; he would distrust all men for ever after."

He strode up and down the room, while the poor Starlings looked rather awe-stricken; they had never seen him so thoroughly roused before. At last he threw himself into a chair.

"But let us be just," he said; "let us in pity's name—pity for that poor girl, and pity for that other woman's miserable stupidity—consider what is best to be done. Exonerated Miss Dare must be. To leave her in ignorance of the crime imputed to her would be culpable; for who knows what harm the slander might do her in the future, when she would be powerless to refute it? Yes, she must be told. Mrs. Starling, you must tell her."

Cicely undertook this duty with grave misgivings, but found her task easier than she had supposed it would be. Edith Dare only laughed scornfully. "What *does* it matter?" she said. "What can one expect of gross ignorance, combined with petty jealousy and vanity? James Vraille knows. Folly, he told me the other day, works far more mischief in the world than sin. He is right."

"But," asked Cicely in surprise, "do you not intend to punish Mrs. Bompas for spreading such wicked reports about you? Do you not care what she says of you? It may do you harm."

"Not it. No sensible person would believe a word Mrs. Bompas says; and for the opinion of the world in general I care not a single rush."

Cicely had used her utmost tact in making known Mrs. Bompas's absurd accusations to Edith, and congratulated herself upon her diplomacy. She was quite relieved to find how resignedly her friend took what to any one else would have been a cruel blow. "Why, she treated the whole thing with the scorn and contempt it deserves," she said to Tom.

She would have been surprised could she have seen "the proud Edith," as she called her, fling herself upon her bed and moan, "There is no such thing as justice, except Nature's cruel justice; effort is of no avail—none; it is better, far better, to be a silly fool like that woman than to be cursed with brains and sensibility as I am. He is right. The world for some people is an impossible place to live in."

There was a tap at the door, and in an instant she was the haughty, upright Edith Dare of a week or two ago.

"Come in," she said, and Judith's rugged countenance appeared.

"Master's in the nuss'ry, miss, an' wants ter know if he can speak to yer a minnit 'fore he goes." She snapped out the words, and when she had finished speaking the muscles of her mouth twitched comically as if she were chewing something hard between her teeth. Then, suddenly, she added, "Is there nothin' I can do for yer, please, miss?"

Edith looked into the quaint, stern face, and said slowly, "Judith, do you know I have been accused of theft?"

"Poor dear!" were the only words that Mrs. Foresight could find to say; but they were enough, more

than enough. They were an acquittal without a trial ; and for this very reason they brought balm to the girl's injured heart. Her pride was humbled, but she herself was lifted up to the high pinnacle of honesty on which Mrs. Foresight always stood by those simple words, " Poor dear ! "

" You know what sorrow means," she said, with her arms round the rugged woman's neck and her head resting on her hard shoulder ; " I can see it in your face, as I can in his. You, you know that I am incapable of such a thing before I deny it, don't you ? Judith, the whole story is a villainous lie ! "

" Lor, miss, who ever could suppose it was anythin' else, comin' from where it did ? There, there, don't 'ee cry, missy dear, but go inter the master an' see what he has to say. He has a way with him of putting these things right in no time."

He was very gentle ; all his fury had abated. When she entered the nursery he had his boy on his knee telling him a story about " a little baa-lamb that had lost its mother and went bleating down the street in search of her."

" Are you fond of children ? " he asked, just as if that were the only question then present in his mind.

" Miss Dare been clyin," said little Jim, looking up at Edith. " Don't cly, Miss Dare ; boy cly fumtimes, hink."

The girl caught him up in her arms and kissed him, pretending to laugh, while all the time the tears were wet upon her cheeks and the boy's sympathetic little hands were trying to wipe them away.

Jim talked to her very gently and encouragingly.

He told her that she must, in justice to herself, compel Mrs. Bompas to retract every word she had said to Cicely, and declared that, if she failed, he would take the matter in hand himself. And then he questioned her about her future, her intentions, her wishes.

"I am obliged," he said, "to go up to London some day soon myself on business. The fact is, my dear old uncle has given me some money, and I have to see about it. When I am there, I may just as well make arrangements for you; and if you will trust me, I will do the very best I can. In the meantime you must remain here; to run away would be the worst thing you could possibly do"—he put it like that; and he spoke the truth, but not quite the whole of it.

"Eventually," he continued after a pause, "I mean to leave this place. You once told me I was wasted here, and"—he smiled—"I am vain enough to believe you. There are great things to be done in life; and instead of chucking away my time as I have done, I am going to try and get a more responsible command. My uncle wishes it. When I come back from London I will show you his letter. But what I wished to say *now* is, don't be disheartened, don't be downcast: never, as long as I'm alive, say you have no friend to turn to; you shall always have one, whatever—whatever happens."

She thanked him in words and in looks, and they talked on and on; they two—and the child. There was much to settle and discuss; but the moody Major had for the time thrown the burden of care from off his shoulders, and laughed at her thanks while he played horses with his boy. All his shyness and diffidence

had departed, and he was as childish as his child could wish. His high spirits were infectious, and little Jim that afternoon for the first time in his life drove, or tried to drive, a very refractory tandem, instead of, as usual, a single horse.

But Nemesis, in the shape of Judith, at length appeared, and little Jim was told to "say good-night like a good boy," an injunction he only partially obeyed; for after saying, "Good-night, daddee, God b'ess oo ; good-night, Miss Dare, God b'ess oo too," he suddenly exclaimed, "you orful orty Lalla ter take er boy ter bye-bye. 'Anter hear about er poor ickle baa-lamb 'gain, that lost his muffer boo ! hoo !"

But Judith bore him off, expostulations and all.

"I generally go in and say good-night to him when he's in bed," said Jim shyly ; "would you like to come with me ?"

Edith readily assented, and, accordingly, when Judith knocked at the wall to intimate that all was ready, they went into the nursery together, where they found little Jim kneeling up in bed in what Vraille called his "ephod."

"Boy goin' to say his p'ayers now," he remarked cheerily, folding his arms before him.

Judith sat on a chair beside his cot and held his hands in hers ; Vraille and Edith Dare stood at the foot of the bed and watched. When he had been reduced by Judith's injunctions to a proper state of mind, he began, very slowly and haltingly, to repeat—

"Gen—tle Jesus—meek an' mile,
'Ook upon a ickle—chile;
Pit—ee my thim——"

And there he stopped; the word was too difficult for him. But after several attempts, prompted by Judith, he got out a confused sound which was allowed to pass, and then went on—

“ ‘Uffer me—to come to ’e—anem !’ ”

“ No,” muttered a deep voice huskily; “ I cannot repeat ‘ amen ’ to that—not now—not yet.”

“ He allus will say *anem* ‘stead o’ *amen*,” Judith explained. But Vraille did not hear; he had caught up the warm little quivering body in his arms and was folding it to his heart.

“ To think,” he said in an undertone to Edith, “ that the only word those baby lips could not repeat was *simplicity*. Would God that I were as he is ! ”

She did not answer, but took the boy from him, and herself laid him down in his bed again, kissing him tenderly as she did so. Then they left Judith to put him to sleep.

Judith was extraordinarily grim and taciturn that night, which meant that something unusually burdensome was weighing on her mind. A lady, a real lady, had kissed her, and such a thing had never happened to her before in her whole life’s experience.

The complex emotions which had prompted Edith Dare to do what she had done were far beyond Mrs. Foresight’s powers of analysis—as, possibly, they had been beyond Edith’s—but Judith put her own interpretation on the incident, and expressed it in her own way to little Jim as she hushed him off to sleep.

“ He’s that big an’ grand baby-boy,” she said, “ that folks is afeerd ter anger ‘im, an’ p’raps she didn’t know

his 'eart quite like. But, lor ! he's never thinkin' of hisself, 'e ain't, but allus o' other people, an' that's what'll get un inter trouble one o' these fine days, I'm thinkin'. Hush-sh ! now—go ter sleep, an' don't be singin' 'Allelulia ! Allelulia !' any more. Lord ! what a powerful holt them Salvationers, as they call theirselves, 'as taken on yer, to be sure."

"Bye, baby buntin'," she crooned ; "daddy's gone a huntin"—aye, that he 'as—for mares' nests. That there Bompas'll never listen to reason. Miss Dare—a lady born 'an bred, spite of her father, an' one as ain't above kissin' Judith Foresight—may call upon 'er, an' call upon 'er, an' call upon 'er, but *she'll* never get no explana-shuns, as he calls 'em ; not she—I knows better. 'Ave, justice done yer,' says he—that she never will ; but I'll see justice done nex' time I catches sight of 'Arriet or Alfred 'Miss Edith' he's taken ter call 'er now—an' a fine upstandin' noble-lookin' pair they be, too. Well, well, it's a curos world, baby boy—an' you've never knowd a mother's love, poor chick, nor he a wife's, for that matter Bye, bye, bye. Hush-sh ! Aye, you're sleepin' now, sweetheart, an' restin' ; maybe he, too, will be findin' what'll seem to him like rest some day, and soon, p'r'aps."

The baby in the cot at her side turned. "Allelulia," he said in his sleep. "Army band—say—Allelulia—Lalla—Alle—"

"Hush—sh, hush—sh," said Judith, and all was still.

James Vraille, the man always kicking against pricks, had set himself an impossibility to perform, and of

course he failed. Common justice, he fancied, the merest atom of common-sense, was all that was required to set Miss Dare high above the suspicion entertained by Mrs. Bompas. Unfortunately, this common justice and common-sense could only be supplied by Mrs. Bompas herself to be of any use. He told Edith to go to Golden Hill, and demand to be confronted with the servants. Edith went, and was met at the hall door with the sneer, "Mrs. Bompas is not at home, and never will be." He then went himself, and was unfortunate enough to find that the widow was "busily engaged." He met her in the street, walking with the Taplows; she looked him full in the face and cut him dead. He had to acknowledge himself defeated, and he chafed under his defeat. But there the matter did not rest. Notwithstanding all his experience, it never occurred to him that a woman who believes she has been deceived is about as easy to approach as a tigress, and that a *silly* woman who *fancies* herself deceived is an opponent encased in a mail of prejudice and armed with poisoned weapons. The news soon spread that Mrs. Bompas had found out the Major's true character at last, and had "sent him about his business." Round and round, and round again, it went, gathering in volume and importance. Merrily and even joyfully wagged St. Dogwells tongues, like the clappers of empty bells. Was he fit to be known? Ought he not, after his conduct—Miss Dare was, of course, no better than she should be—to be cut? Certainly. And so, too, ought the Starlings; though they, poor deluded things, were not quite so bad as that deceitful Miss Dare.

All this affected Jim no more than the surging sea affects the light on Eddystone ; it was all beneath him, and he knew none of it. But Judith, whose existence rested on a lower level, it attacked with the full force of its malignant fury. She harboured her vengeance for many a day, but at last seized her opportunity and made the most of it. There was no "cutting" Mrs. Foresight when she conceived that she had a duty to perform ; Alfred met her face to face and she would not let him pass.

"I'm glad to meet yer," she said, "with yer 'igh-eeled boots, an' yer sham rings outside yer gloves. Got 'em on 'cause it's Sunday, I s'pose? but 'twill take mor'n them to make a man o' *you*; yer snivlin', drivlin', lyin', thievin' monkey on an orgin. Come, prick up yer ears, an' list t' what I'm sayin'; let yer witnesses—you there 'Arriet, an' you there master Algy listen too. Are you all ready? Well then, this yer funkey is a liar an' a thief, an' were I a man I'd thrash un within an inch o' his skulkin' life. But, anyways, he and his 'complices can bring an action 'gainst me for 'famation of character, which is all *I* want. There; that's my last say." And Mrs. Foresight turned her back upon the little crowd she had managed to collect ; and stalked homeward with a grim smile of infinite satisfaction on her face.

Meanwhile, Vraille sat in his barrack-room a night or two after the arrival of Edith Dare at Guildhall Villa and turned things over in his mind.

Marriage for him had meant a tragical mistake. He had found it all out—a sudden wrench, a heart-pang or two of deep regret, and darkness had filled the

cavity left by an infatuation that had been dissipated ; there was nothing now remaining but the scar. He had always believed in the poetic justice of things—was it possible that, after all, a glimmer of hope shone on the horizon of his lonely path ? Were goodness and sweetness to be his reward after all his long journey —the attainment of that peace which he had longed for all his life, and which had never until now seemed to him attainable ? Then there was his keen sense of duty. The hand of fate seemed to be pointing out the way toward a complete fulfilment of it : the girl was miserable—far more miserable than he had any right to suppose himself to be ; perhaps he could rescue her from that misery, and his pledged word would have been kept in far, far more than the letter—in the very spirit.

“ What a fool I have been ! ” he cried, starting to his feet and striding across the room to his writing-table.

‘ Hours and hours, days, weeks of thought have I spent, cribbed in this coffin of a room, wasting my life and opportunities. Now”—and he swept his arm through the air—“ let me, here, to-night, wipe out the past and start afresh without fear or hesitation. I will—from to-morrow ; I will ! ”

He took a letter from the drawer of his writing-table and went back with it to his chair.

“ I told you once, Wilkes,” he said, looking down at his dog as he filled a pipe and lighted it, “ that we were to be grim. I revoke that ; we are to eat, drink, and be merry—not because to-morrow we die, but because it is our duty to diffuse happiness on all around us, and to be cheerful ourselves. Come, let us see what he says.”

He unfolded his letter, and holding it near to the lamp—for Uncle Ben's handwriting had latterly become more and more crabbed and microscopic—read—

“MY DEAR BOY,

“I hasten to reply to your last to see if I can make you less doleful than you seem to be. Of course you have made mistakes in your life. Who has not? I, at any rate, who have made hundreds, would not give twopence for the chap who said he had made none. But the fact is, you want change—change of society, scene, and work. Get out of St. Dogwells; go to that army-agent and buy an exchange at once—anything you like, except one that will take you out of England, and pay anything you like for it. Perhaps you have not money enough to make you independent of all other considerations; so I have transferred to your agents sufficient to give you an extra thousand a year. I am a rich man with no use for my money, and nothing to look forward to, so I can afford to make you a little present. It is yours, to do as you like with, now instead of a little later on—that is all.

“But, my dear boy, if you wish to thank me, you can do so in two ways. First, by trying to obliterate that ‘pale cast’ which seems to have come over you of late; secondly, by sticking to your profession. Don’t talk of leaving it. I have watched you from boyhood to manhood treading, as it were, the wine-press of experience; and, before I die, I hope to see you, not only happy, but full of the right sort of ambition, raising the name of Vraille on high. Life is before not behind you, as it is with me, make the most

of it while you can. Chuck thought out o' window ; do that which comes to your hand to do, and do it *cheerfully*, as well as manfully and honestly ; the rest will follow. You want sympathy, and you have mine, fully ; you know that. You have had bad luck hitherto ; but, with a fresh start, you are young enough to get a great deal of enjoyment out of life yet. So do as I say."

The letter ended with some brief allusions to the writer's health and some very kind messages to little Jim.

" You write charmingly about him," concluded the old gentleman ; " and I can well understand what a source of pleasure he must be to you. I always knew it would be so."

Jim leant back in his chair, and took his pipe out of his mouth.

Yes, he had trodden the winepress of experience red-stained. He had tasted life, and knew it, and the pitifulness of it all ; he had writhed under its injustices, and had recently seen others suffer them. He had, as a boy, as a man, looked up to, loved, and honoured Uncle Ben. Uncle Ben was getting feeble, and would die. What would he do then ? What could he do but submit ? Daily and hourly there was going up to Heaven the smoke of sacrifice and suffering.

Then, as he sat there, looking down upon the faithful dog at his feet, thinking of Judith's fidelity, and so of the sweetness of little Jim, he recollect ed the words that Edith Dare had spoken in the sandy cove—where

the sun had shone, the waters danced, the little children laughed, where the air had breathed health and strength and fragrance—"Hope comes quickest to those who most readily despond."

He would hope on and fear not. Thought long continued only led to the slough of despond in which a man's struggles were not only unsightly but vain. That feeling of isolation was the outcome of pure selfishness and nothing else. Who was he, to attempt to fathom the unfathomable?—an insignificant shaving of humanity. No, he had not done his duty in the past; he had at best been beating the air. Uncle Ben saw it; Uncle Ben, who had always been so good to him, had pointed him out a new path, and he would take it. He had his child, he had more—he had hope. On the morrow he would turn over a fresh leaf in his book of life, struggle to forget himself, and strive to cast sunshine where he had hitherto thrown gloom.

With this determination dominating his whole mind, he went to bed, and—eventually—to sleep.

CHAPTER VII.

BE CHEERFUL !

THE week's leave that Major Vraille had taken was nearly up. He had but one day more to spend in London, and then he must return. He had almost succeeded in one of his objects ; in the other he had signally failed. His exchange to an agreeable and important station, where he would find plenty of pleasant companionship and soldiering to his taste, and be within easy reach of London at the same time, was well-nigh effected ; but as to his endeavours to find a suitable *pied-à-terre* for Edith Dare, his efforts, so far, had been absolutely barren of result. He had done his very best ; he had spent the greater part of his time in hansom cabs, tearing from one end of London to the other ; he had visited agency office after agency office, answered advertisements in person and by letter, pestered his friends, and found, in the end, that it was by no means so easy a matter as he had supposed to secure a pleasant and ladylike occupation for a girl of exceptional talent, well connected, and not exacting in the matter of emolument so long as a comfortable home was guaranteed. Had he confided in Edith or Cicely he might have spared himself a good deal of unnecessary labour. But he had not done so absolutely, because he had wished his success

to be a surprise to the inmates of Guildhall Villa on his return. He had gone his own way, and it had led to nothing.

But he was not dejected. On the contrary, his step, as he walked along the street from his club to Mr. Skrim's office, was sprightly, almost jaunty; in his button-hole he wore a flower, and he whistled softly to himself as he went along.

"After all," he muttered to himself, as he rang Mr. Skrim's bell, "I may just as well look upon it as the best of omens; and so it is. However, in a day or two I shall know for certain."

Mr. Skrim was disengaged, and Jim was ushered into his sanctum. The rosy little agent seemed not a day older than when Captain Vraille had sought his assistance in years gone by, although the Major's face showed only too plainly how many years had passed since then.

"Well, Mr. Skrim, have you settled the thing for me?"

"Next door to it," replied the negotiator cautiously.

"Why not quite?"

"Well, the fact is, Major, you're flying high, and must pay high, I'm afraid, for what you want. You can't get the best station in England, and the best battery in the service for nothing, you know. Now, another hundred would, I think, be pretty certain——"

"All right," said Jim, going to the window and looking out.

"And an extra twenty-five——"

"All right," said Jim, without turning round.

"But make it fifty, and——"

"Look here, Mr. Skrim, just show me the man's own instructions about this exchange, will you?" Jim had come back to the table, and was scrutinising the agent closely.

"Confidential, my dear sir—confidential," said Mr. Skrim hastily.

"All right; then I'll write to him myself. I know him a little, and I dare say we shall be able to come to an understanding between ourselves."

But this did not suit the mediator at all. The Major was joking; he was always so very exacting and precipitate; no doubt the matter could be arranged in the course of the day; a telegram should be despatched at once, and the answer sent round to the club.

"I don't care how soon it comes off, you know," said Jim, picking up his hat; "but I want a fortnight or so to look round me before I join."

The feeling that all he was saying and doing was but a repetition of what he had said and done before crept over him as he slowly sauntered back to his club. The scene was precisely the same as it had been on that previous occasion some long, long time back in his memory: the roads were under repair, there was a listlessness about every one he met, and a drowsiness in the air; Mr. Skrim, the houses, the shop-windows, the club, the expected telegram, the musty smell in the smoking-room, and the papers littered about—all, everything and everybody, the same as it had been then. He himself even had not changed; he was acting the same part; and, please Heaven and the Fates, he would begin his life afresh from that point and live it as if the intervening period had never been.

“ Hallo, Jim ! ”

He looked up from the paper on his knees, lying with the advertisement side uppermost, and exclaimed—

“ Hallo, Dick ! ”

“ Well, who’d have thought of seeing you ? ”

“ And where on earth have you sprung from ? ”

“ All right, eh ? ”

“ All right.”

And then silence fell on these two Britons, a silence due to British shyness and reserve. Each had a hundred questions to ask the other—each was excessively pleased and glad to meet the other ; neither for the moment had anything particular to do, and neither spoke. They had shaken hands warmly, and “ did not know what to say next.”

“ Have a drink ? ” said Doyle at last.

Jim assented from pure good fellowship. The drinks were brought, and then they thawed.

Doctor Dick had only arrived from India a few weeks previously, and was on leave, “ finding London slow, with every one away, and biding his time for the pheasants.” He was having a “ fairly good time,” considering the denuded state of the streets, and the deserted condition of the theatres, but he “ hoped to do better as he went along.” He certainly wore the air of a man bent on enjoyment ; his handsome face was wreathed in smiles, complacent smiles ; his blue eyes laughed ; his cheeks, albeit he was a boy no longer but a man, bore the bloom of youth and health ; and, as a matter of course, his clothes were new and good, and fitted his figure like a glove.

Jim looked at him and felt refreshed. Here was a man, cheerful, self-contained, calm, bent on enjoying himself, and withal dispensing the contagion of his equanimity on all around—a man to be with; a right good fellow, as Jim knew, and, as Jim believed, honestly and sincerely, a man to admire and to imitate. And yet he felt within himself that he could no more be as Doctor Dick was, and always had been, than he could fly. His heart went out to him, and in ten minutes they were talking, at least Jim was, as if they had but ten minutes more in which to relate all that had happened to them since they last met—and that was much.

They had luncheon together, and by the time their cigars afterwards were well under weigh Jim had recounted the strange chances that had brought him and Edith Dare together, and himself to London on her behalf.

"Well, but, my dear old Jim," said Doctor Dick in his half-affectionate, half-patronising tone, "you'll never do any good the way you're going to work. Who's likely to take a girl on your recommendation, I should like to know, when you can't claim the slightest relationship?"

"I referred everybody to the Army List," said Jim ruefully.

"Pooh! who cares about the Army List nowadays? Look here, I'll try and square this job for you if you like. You say the girl's a nice girl?"

"She's a charming girl, Dick, with all sorts of sides to her character. She's a genius; she can just sing the soul out of you; she's as proud as Lucifer, as tender-

nearted as a child, as honest and straightforward and clever——”

“Hold! enough!” cried Doctor Dick. “I know your ecstasies of old. She just wants a fair start—is that it?”

“That’s it,” said Jim.

“Well, London’s full of my maiden aunts; they simply jostle one another in the street, and they all dote on me. All I have to do is to tell one of them—the first I meet—that another will snap up the chance of doing me a service if she don’t.”

“Look here, Dick, I’m serious about this; indeed I am; don’t turn it into fun.”

“Serious? Of course you are; who ever knew James Vraille anything but serious? So am I serious. Dining here to-night? Right; seven-thirty, sharp.” And before the astonished Jim had well comprehended the situation, Doctor Dick had sauntered across the room and left him alone, looking at the heavy door swinging backward and forward on its hinges.

Vraille employed his afternoon industriously, spending an hour at Fortnum and Mason’s, superintending the packing of a huge hamper, and another hour at a wine-merchant’s sampling champagne. Then he visited a linen-draper, of whom he purchased a quantity of goods warranted to wear and to wash, thence to a jeweller’s, thence to the Lowther Arcade, returning to the club, in time to dress for dinner, loaded with parcels.

“If we don’t have a really good dinner at Guildhall Villa some day soon,” he said to himself, “to inaugurate my good luck, my name’s not James Vraille; and if they don’t all of them—God bless them!—understand

the meaning of these presents—Judith, and little Cicely Starling, and the boy, and—and all of them, then that's not my fault."

At five-and-twenty minutes past seven Doctor Dick appeared, irreproachably attired.

"What do you say to a theatre?" was his first remark.

"I'd sooner," said Jim hesitatingly, "stay here quietly and talk to you."

"So'd I," replied the Doctor. "Come along, the champagne's getting cold."

In his imperturbable way he told Jim that he had arranged with a Miss Dorothy Doyle to board and lodge Miss Dare, for a time to be specified hereafter, and that a room would be placed at her disposal in Miss Dorothy Doyle's house from and after the next day; "and here," he concluded, "is a letter to Miss Dare from my aunt for you to read."

Jim took the letter and read it through.

"A very nice letter," he said. "Dick, how am I to thank you? This is your doing—none of mine, and—and it will come better from you. There is one other thing I want you to do for me, and that is—that is—You see, Dick, she is awfully hard up, poor girl, and I thought—I thought if you would not mind saying that Miss Doyle had kindly consented to enclose a month's salary in advance; if, I mean, you would not mind putting these notes into the letter, and saying they are—it is not strictly true, of course, but near enough—they are from her, you would do me a very great favour. You see, of course, Miss Doyle must be put to no expense, but the girl mustn't know. Will you do this for me like a good fellow?"

The smile faded from Doctor Dick's face ; his blue eyes opened wide with an expression of something like awe ; and he slowly stretched out his hand to take the notes. "How am I to do it, Jim ?" he asked. "Write it, do you mean? or get my aunt to write it, or what?"

"Humph!" said Major Vraille pensively ; "I had not thought of all that." No ; his mind was wandering here, there, and everywhere. He was full of the thoughts that were crowding in upon his brain, thoughts of success ; of joy, perhaps, of happiness and peace. Things were going too well with him.

Doctor Dick could not be expected to know all this. He could only see before him a man whom he knew was capable of leading a forlorn hope without a moment's hesitation or a tremor of fear ; a man from whom pain and disease had never wrung a complaint ; a man ignorant, apparently, of the most ordinary usages of life—a baby among men, and yet a born leader of men.

Jim had recovered himself.

"Dick," he said, brightening up, "be the bearer of your own good news. You said you had nothing particular to do for the next few days ; come back with me to St. Dogwells. I have often longed for your companionship since that dreary time when we said good-bye. Do come back with me, Dick. It's a wretched place, but I will do my best to make you comfortable at the Fort ; and you can see Miss Dare for yourself," he added with subtle persuasion, "and report upon her, if you like, to your aunt. And I can show you my boy ; yes, do come, Dick."

"There, my good fellow," returned the other

smiling ; "don't dissipate your energies. Of course I'll come—nothing I should like better."

They sat up late ; and when at last they separated for the night, Jim's life for the past few years lay bare for Dick to read, with one or two excepted details which were as yet but fancies and not facts.

"His kind eyes seemed to pity," was Jim's last thought as he fell asleep.—"That wretched business must have made a terrible impression on him," was Doctor Dick's.

In the early morning they met upon the platform and the doctor stared at Jim's curious assortment of baggage. "Why, are you the showman of a travelling caravan ?" he said.

Jim laughed and paid his "extra-luggage" charge without a murmur. As the train was gliding out of the station he suddenly exclaimed—"I clean forgot Skrim's telegram ; confound it ; my head's like a sieve."

This led to a discussion on the proposed exchange. Jim had grown to loathe St. Dogwells, he said ; it had suited the child, and so he had remained on ; but the drought and the heat, and latterly the deluges of rain had rendered it less healthy than it had been. He had heard from a Doctor Spill whom he knew slightly that there was fever about, and so, with one thing and another, he had determined to apply for leave pending the sanction of his exchange and quit the place for good and all.

"And where do you intend going?" asked Doyle.

"Oh, somewhere quiet ; somewhere near London, I think, for a time ; and then, later on, I want to go to Cannes to see my uncle."

It was a long but not a tedious journey, for Jim when in good spirits was a capital companion, as Dick said laughingly; and Jim, when they had nearly reached their destination, declared he could well have stood an extra hour or two but for the prospect of a talk with "the boy" before the little chap's bedtime.

"He doesn't go to bed till seven," he said, "and we are due at a little after five, so, if you don't mind, we'll just look in and leave some of these things at the house on our way to the Fort."

"I suppose he is begining to talk a bit now?" said Doctor Dick.

"Talk! There's pretty nearly nothing he can't say somehow, excepting any word with *f* in it. It's a very funny thing," pursued Major Vraille thoughtfully, "that he should be able to compete more or less successfully with all the diphthongs except *f*. That stumps him. He said to me the other day—'There's a *slea* biting me toe.' He meant *flea*, you know; and he says *sly* for *fly*, and *sloor* for *door*. By the way, yes, *th* is generally *ff*, except when it's the lisp for an *s*; and he's just beginning to use the word 'because,' which means a dawning appreciation of the sequence of ideas, though he still calls marmalade, *narberlind*, and a gentleman a *juggl'am*. But, oh, I don't know, Dick; it's impossible to analyse a child's language; you might as well try to analyse his mind. And a child's mind is profound—there's no other word for it. You cannot fathom it; pure and simple as it is, you cannot even see far into it; you cannot reason, still less argue with it; you think you know all it contains, and pretty nearly everything it doesn't, when,

all of a sudden, out comes an observation that fairly startles you with its originality. Things you tell him he will hide away somewhere in the convolutions of his little brain, as a squirrel hides away nuts, and finds them again days afterwards when he wants them, but when you least expect it. For an hour at a time he will live all by himself in a little world of make-believe. At one minute his little speech is doing its very utmost to express his every little thought; at the next he is solemnly silent, gazing before him, seeming to listen to whispers in the air which coarser ears than his are not meant to hear. Who can construe a child's thoughts then? The wisest man that ever lived knows nothing of the workings of a little child's mind."

"Why, Jim," said Doctor Dick, "you should write an essay, or, better still, a poem, upon children, you seem to know so much about them."

"Not about them, only about him; I know, or think I know, my own boy. We have been so much together, you see, Dick, that we understand one another. Other children seem half afraid of me; but he is never afraid. He comes into the room with his head up and his back flat, and says 'Daddee,' with a perfect fearlessness that is delightful—delightful! He has never been threatened with dark rooms, or bears or policemen, or any wicked nonsense of that sort. He knows no fear; he knows no shame; he is a little barbarian, but for all that a perfect little gentleman. He has the manners of a gentleman; his natural unconsciousness of self, his perfect ease, his utter disregard of class and station, make him a gentleman—he cannot help being one. And then, Dick, he is so generous—always ready to

offer the dog a piece of his cake before he touches it himself; so full of life, and spirits, geniality, gladness; so happy, so contented with everything and everybody. He is a never-ending joy to me; but I could not write a poem, or even an essay about him; I feel too keenly what Longfellow said: ‘He is the *living* poem, and all the rest are dead.’”

Not another word was spoken. There was nothing more to be said. The infinite tenderness in the gaunt man’s tone, the look of tenderness in his eyes was enough: Doctor Dick leant back in his corner without a word, and Jim, with his chin resting on his hand, gazed out of the window at the landscape racing by.

The train at last rolled into the St. Dogwells’ station, and a ten minutes’ drive took them to Guildhall Villa.

Cicely came running into the hall.

“Welcome back, Major,” she said; “you’ll stay and dine here to-night after your journey, won’t you? You must be tired.”

“I’ve brought a friend with me,” said Jim.

“Who is it?” she asked, peering out of the open door.

“Doctor Dick!” he replied in a tone of exultation.

Often had he talked of Doctor Dick to her and Edith Dare; many a time and oft had he sung his praises. Cicely was delighted; of course he must stay and dine too. Doctor Dick was accordingly brought in and introduced; the cab was unloaded; the case of champagne and the hamper of provisions were conveyed into the kitchen; Cicely bustled off after them to make the necessary preparations; and then Jim whispered cautiously—

"Now, Dick, come up with me and see him."

Opening his dressing-bag, which was lying in the hall, he took from it a couple of brown-paper parcels, and a highly-polished brass key-bugle, and with them in his hand sprang up the stairs, two at a time.

On the first landing he stopped to see if Dick were following.

"Listen," he said.

They stood still and listened. There was not a sound, and, somewhat more slowly, they ascended the second flight of stairs.

"Curious," said Jim, pausing again a little higher up, and turning round; "they must have heard the cab. I made certain Judith would have brought him out to shout to me over the banisters, as he generally does. I wanted you to hear him."

At the nursery door he stopped once more, and stood quite still with his hand on the handle, listening.

"There, there—there, there! By-e, by-e, by-e! Hush-sh, hush-sh, hush-sh! Ne-ver mind-it the-en—by-e bab-ee, by-e!" came the crooning sounds of Judith's voice, accompanied by the soft rhythmical beating of her foot on the floor, as she hummed the soothing lullaby.

"Why, it's not nearly his bedtime yet," muttered Jim; and he opened the door and went in. "What's the matter?" he asked quickly, taking a rapid step forward and bending over the little figure in Judith's arms.

"Just a bit of a cold he's caught," she said; "he's been fractious with it all the day. He didn't have his

proper 'mount o' sleep at noon neither, and seemed drowsy like, so I thought I'd hush un off."

"Poor little chap," said Jim softly, for the child's eyes were closed, and he did not wish to disturb him. "I'm so sorry," he added, turning to Doctor Dick; "he's not quite himself to-night, it seems, and we must wait until to-morrow to give him the things. It's a pity, too; I did want you to see him."

It was a pity. He had bounded up the stairs with those brown-paper parcels and that beautiful key-bugle, so full of pride and expectancy, and now they were held behind his back, for the time being useless, and rather in the way than otherwise. It was a pity.

He put the parcels on the mantelpiece looking rather crestfallen; but the bugle he kept in his hand. No paper wrappings hid its charms, and if left upon the mantelpiece it would be certain to attract Master Jim's attention directly he awoke; so Jim, not wishing to be forestalled in the pleasure of witnessing the first effects of his present, kept it in his hand.

"He isn't a bad-looking boy, is he, Dick?" he asked in a tone that implied he was the most beautiful child in Christendom.

Doctor Dick bent over the bundle of white flannel in Judith's arms and looked at it long and earnestly before answering. "Children are almost always beautiful in sleep," he said at last, looking up, "but this boy of yours, Jim, is a perfect picture—indeed he is."

Doctor Dick's praise was merited. The boy's full, rosy lips, half parted in sleep, the delicate curves of his soft sweet mouth, opening like a rose-bud, the long lashes lying on his cheek, the wealth of flaxen curls

scattered in profusion over Judith's arm, the dimpled little hand lying on her breast, all helped to form the picture that Dr. Dick had said, and said honestly, was perfect, and Jim, as he bent over the boy once more, no doubt considered very, very perfect.

"God bless you, my darling boy," he murmured, so softly that none heard him but the child.

Little Jim slowly opened his eyes. "Daddee—dear daddee," he said drowsily; and, turning his head slowly, he held out one little hand. Jim seized it.

"Are you glad to have him back, little chap? Have you missed him? Shall we have a right good game to-morrow to make up for lost time? and will you play upon the trumpet daddy's brought?"

This was all very imprudent, and Judith said "Hush!" But the boy had caught the word, and in a sleepy little voice, with but a poor attempt at enthusiasm in it, said, "Zes, daddee de-ar, boy 'ants ter play er t'umpet 'ike Army band."

With a smile of triumph Jim held up the glittering key-bugle and placed it in the boy's outstretched hand. "There's your trumpet, little Jim," he said, "and to-morrow you shall play it to your heart's content."

But after putting it to his lips and blowing without producing any sound, the boy dropped it on the floor, and turning his head toward his nurse, said wearily, "Don't 'ant er t'umpet now, Lalla; play it 'nother day; 'anter go to bye-bye now."

The look of disappointment had scarcely faded from Jim's face, when the child, in the same weary little tone,

pleaded sadly, "Let er boy go bye-bye, Lalla, p'ease ; boy 'ick, better 'gain to-morrow, hink !"

"Tell me, Dick, is anything the matter ?" and a look of terror swept across his face.

"Lord love yer, no, sir !" exclaimed Judith ; "just a bit of a cold he's caught, that's all."

"Nothing that a good night's rest won't cure," said Dr. Dick.

"Of course not," replied Jim, hastily ; "come, let's leave him, then, and not bother him any more to-night."

They had got half-way down the stairs when Dr. Dick suddenly remembered his hat, which he had left in the nursery, and ran back to fetch it.

"Nurse," he said to Judith, "let me know—quietly, without bothering Major Vraille, when the boy's in bed. I'd like to have another look at him; I'm a doctor, you know—Dr. Doyle."

"It's this bit of a cold he's caught," said Judith.

"I know," said Dick; and he hurried out of the nursery and down the stairs.

All that day, and for a week past, Vraille had been listening to the still small voice within, which bade him smile and be cheerful. Be cheerful ! Seek to diffuse happiness on all around ! He had laid those lessons to heart, and had seen the wisdom of them. He had done more ; he had sought to profit by them, and had determined so to guide his future life that he himself as well as others should benefit by the change. Be cheerful ! It was a duty that man owed to man. The world was beautiful ; men and women were better than they seemed to be ; love and sympathy were sweet. The

clouds had risen, and fortune had appeared at last to smile upon him ; a new and better life, better because filled with hope, lay before him. Let him be cheerful then, and smile when others smiled ; smile, too, when they frowned, and seek to find out the meaning of the frown, due, perhaps, to sorrow that a little sympathy might soothe. And surely he himself had experienced real sorrow enough without unnecessarily creating for himself more out of idle apprehension. Let him, then, as Uncle Ben had said, get out of himself, and talk as the others were talking. There was no excuse for his glumness ; kind friends were welcoming him back amongst them, kind faces were smiling upon him, kind voices were thanking him for the presents he had brought. Tom was congratulating him on the results of his negotiations in London and wishing him luck ; an open telegram in his hand told him that his exchange had been effected, and on his own terms. One voice, sweeter than the rest, had spoken to him softly of gratitude, had soothed and caressed him, as it were, and calmed his troubled spirit, but now had passed away, and he could hear it in the distance mingling pleasantly with Dr. Dick's. Cicely, thoughtful, tender-hearted little Cicely, had assured him that a good night's rest was all that was required to make little Jim himself again on the morrow. Judith had no fear ; her rugged nature refused to admit a doubt ; it was a trifling childish ailment, she said, that would quickly pass away. Then what had he to fear ? Nothing ; and yet he felt he would have given thousands at that moment to hear one shout from little Jim.

But little Jim did not shout or even cry ; he only

lay wearily in Judith's arms, complaining of feeling tired and wanting sleep.

Be cheerful! The champagne corks were popping; the contents of the hamper were spread upon the table. Tom was talking to him about his exchange, and he was answering, but saying the wrong thing apparently, for Tom laughed good-naturedly at his answers. Dr. Dick and Cicely were chatting; Edith Dare was very silent. What was it she had said to him a week or two ago?—"The whole creation groaneth and travailleth in pain." That was not true. The sun shone on the just and unjust; the gentle rain watered the earth; spring followed winter, and summer spring; the green things put forth their tender leaves; the swallows cleaved the air; the fish leaped in the stream; the young animals gambolled; little children laughed and screamed and played; everything that had life enjoyed life—and Nature was perpetually warring against life. Oh, no, no; Nature assisted life—loved life, and most of all young life! Life was meant to be happy. It was happy. Be cheerful!

"Let us drink the Major's health in a bumper!" cried Tom, suddenly. They all drank health and life and prosperity to him; and there was that in their eyes as they drank and looked at him over their glasses that told him he was loved.

"God bless every one of you," he said, "you are good, kind people;" and he felt he had made a foolishly inadequate reply to their kind wishes; but he could not for the life of him add another word.

The conversation rattled on, and he fancied he was listening to what was said; but in reality, in himself,

he knew that it was not so. He was seeing other scenes and hearing other sounds. He saw himself sitting in a large high room in an Indian bungalow, listening to a puny baby's wails and a nurse's crooning song; while from afar, through the silence of the night, came the strains of merry music. Little Jim had been but an infant then, a pale-faced, puling baby, who had been ill, very ill; but he had recovered. That was the way with children—down one minute and up the next. Many a time since then had he seen him suffering childish pains—restless, contented with nothing, unable or unwilling to eat his food; many a time had he seen him fall and bruise and hurt himself, draw in his breath, pucker up his face, remain so silent that he seemed to be choking, and then burst forth into a series of passionate or piteous lamentations. But he had recovered. He was so strong and full of life, so hearty—yes, and vigorous. Those who understood these things said he was the most healthy child in the parish. Then why argue thus? Why balance pros and cons and make himself miserable with vain imaginings—allow himself to be frightened at a shadow? Because he had never seen the boy's face quite like that before; the touch of his little hand had never seemed so hot; the flaxen curls had never looked so limp. Pooh! Dick had noticed nothing of all this, and Dick was a doctor, whereas he was not. He was but an ignorant, mopish, apprehensive fool, who, because he had felt disappointment at his child's reception of him, imagined his child must necessarily be ill! Be cheerful!

In the street outside the Salvationists were singing

joyful hymns; hymns he had listened to a hundred times, but had never before thought sad. "For we shall wear a crown; we shall wear a crown," they sang, "in the New Jerusalem!" What did that mean?—in the New Jerusalem?

Cicely and the others went to the window to look out; Edith Dare came towards him.

"He's got a slight cold," she said softly. "It must have been a disappointment to you not to hear him shout; but he was tired, poor little fellow, and Judith thought it best not to wake him. He was crying for you all the day, too; I tried to comfort him, but could not; he wanted you, he said."

Be cheerful! Diffuse sunshine on all around! Think how sorrowful frail humanity always must be, labouring under the heavy burdens it has to bear!

Dick went to fetch his pipe. He was a long time away; but Tom talked gaily about the battery and the battery's doings while the Major had been in London.

Dr. Dick came back at last, and when he and Tom were fairly launched upon a subject that seemed to interest them both, Jim crept out of the room and stole softly up the stairs.

"I've been fretting myself, Judith," he said, "about the boy, and I want you to tell me honestly if you think him ill. If so, we must face it and get him well again."

"Ill, sir?" she exclaimed; "not he. The young doctor's been to look at un, yer know." Her allegiance to her master was proof against all Dr. Dick's admonitions and injunctions.

"Has he?" asked Jim, quickly. "What did he say?"

"Nothin'," replied the inflexible Mrs. Foresight. "What could he say? Them doctors knows nothin' no mor'n I know. I say the boy has caught a bit of a cold, an' so he has. Look at him, kickin' his blessed little legs over the sheets. Does he look like a sick child? Not he!"

Her last words were almost drowned by the shouts of the Salvationists, who were now marching in procession down the street singing a glad anthem, "Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!"

"Alleluia," repeated little Jim, his eyes wide open staring at the lamp. "Army band sing, 'Alleluia,' daddee dear—'ee s'all wear er c'own.'"

"My boy," said Jim, bending over the cot and taking his chubby little hand in his, "my baby boy; try to go to sleep, there's a good little man. Are your bits of hands hot, my son? Just a little. But you'll be better to-morrow, won't you? and we will have a splendid game—you and I and little Cis."

"Daddee."

"What, sweet boy?"

"Boy 'ick—boy better to-morrow—hink."

"Yes, well again to-morrow."

"Army band sing 'Alleluia,' daddee, an' 'ee s'all wear er c'own."

"Yes, my boy, some day; but go to sleep now."

"Anter see er pitty picter of er poor man cumblin' down, daddee, 'cause his c'oss too heavy."

"No, no," said Jim, with a gulp in his voice; "not now, my boy, not now; you must go to sleep now.

Come, put your arms round daddy's neck and give him one sweet kiss before he goes."

The boy lifted up his little arms, Jim's grey head sank between them, and they closed about his neck.

Then, gently laying the boy back upon his pillow and stroking his curly head, with a muttered, "God watch over you," he turned away.

"Judith," he said, taking her by the arm, "he seems a little better now, don't you think? There is nothing much the matter with him, is there?"

"Lor, master dear," she answered, quickly, "don't ee fret a morsel now about him; he'll be his bonny self ter-morrer, never fear."

She adhered stoutly to her former opinion, that he had caught a slight cold which a few hours' "warm" in bed would completely cure. She had been accustomed to children, she said, from her youth up, and understood their ways better than a whole college-full of physicians. No misgivings shook the strength of her firm conviction that "nothin' actual ailed him;" and she was so resolute in this opinion that Jim felt comforted.

Even as she spoke the boy's eyes closed under the soothing influences of the hard hand that patted him so softly, and the deep voice that coaxed him to sleep with an occasional, "There's a brave little sodger; there's a brave boy."

"I'll come up again and see him before I go," he said, and, stepping high, he left the room and crept noiselessly down the stairs.

He felt somewhat comforted, but still could not feel absolutely cheerful. Although he did his utmost to think of something else, harassing—and of course

absurd—questions continued to arise, tormenting him like fiends. He knew her honesty and fidelity so well. Was she really as confident as she seemed to be, or was she suppressing her real feelings for his sake? Again, she loved little Jim with a love hardly less than a mother's—and a sharp pang at his heart made his face twitch as he formed this mental comparison—was she then afraid to face the truth, or determined not to face it, until it was cruelly forced upon her? He could not tell; but of one thing he felt certain—she was setting him an example of fortitude and cheerfulness it would be well for him to follow. And yet the obligation seemed to lie upon his spirits like a weight.

The little party was now assembled in the drawing-room. Cicely and Tom were talking to him carelessly, but, it seemed to him, very kindly. Edith Dare and Dr. Dick were sitting apart engrossed in one another, apparently. With grave faces, they were talking in an undertone, and he thought that quick glances of admiration shot repeatedly from Dick's blue eyes. He was glad he admired her; Dick was his best friend on earth, excepting only Uncle Ben; and Edith Dare—but no wonder she looked pleased and animated; he was telling her, most likely, of Miss Dorothy Doyle.

But Dick, just then, was not thinking of Miss Doyle. He was saying: "There was a very dry spring, was there not, with a great deal of east wind, and then a hot summer and a long drought?"

Edith Dare answered that this had been so.

"And latterly," continued Dr. Dick, "you have had a good deal of rain?"

"Deluges," she said; "but tell me, Dr. Doyle, why do you ask?"

He looked at her very steadfastly, and lowering his voice to a murmur, answered—

"You are a brave girl with a sympathetic heart, Vraille tells me. Keep my secret; it is on his account I have been asking you these questions. That little boy of his does not seem well. I am troubled in my mind about him."

"Oh, don't say it's fever;" and she clenched her hands in the earnestness of her appeal; "don't say it's fever. There's so much of it about, I hear; and if little Jim—caught it, I think it would kill Major Vraille."

"I can say nothing to-night; to-morrow I shall come down early in the morning and look at him. Tell Mrs. Starling for me, please—but not a word to Jim; remember, I know nothing yet."

"Oh, poor fellow, poor fellow," she said, clasping her hands tightly together and entwining her slim fingers.

"You like him then?" Dick whispered, softly.

"I love him," she replied, naïvely, and he looked surprised. "I love him," she repeated, slowly. "Once, I only knew that he was a man to respect and honour, but now I see that he is a man to love as well. No one who has the understanding to appreciate him, no one who has the heart to feel, can help loving him. You do not know, Dr. Doyle, you cannot, how every one here loves him."

"But I do know," Dick replied, understanding now what she meant, "that he is too high, too great, too simple-minded, too tender-hearted for our work-a-day

world. I have seen him, Miss Dare, as fierce—fiercer than a lion ; and I have seen him, too, as gentle as a lamb. A braver man than James Vraille never buckled on a sword or faced an enemy—he is a soldier from the crown of his head to the sole of his foot ; but put him into the ordinary rut of everyday life and there he sticks, a shy, reserved, seemingly commonplace man, who has no desire to get on ; place him in the world's crowd of busybodies, self-seekers, brain-suckers, back-stair crawlers, and he is nowhere—a nonentity, jostled about and pushed aside. He will never do himself justice—poor old Jim ! he will never succeed ; he *cannot push.*"

"But has he not already succeeded ?" she asked, her eyes flashing with enthusiasm, "not, perhaps, as the world counts success, but—" and so they went on talking, going back over the old, old ground ; each of them acquiring fresh knowledge of the past with every step, each of them vying with the other to do him honour ; each of them, too, learning to know and like the other through and because of him whom they both admired.

But Jim knew nothing of it all ; he could only sit alone, hugging his apprehension to his heart, yet rejecting it as poison. So far as he could tell, Edith Dare and Dick had taken a great fancy to one another, and he was glad.

"We'll get her to sing to us," said Cicely, and she went over to where they were sitting.

As Edith moved across the room towards the piano, he rose from his chair and met her. "Do not sing that sad song, to-night," he said ; "sing something cheerful."

Dick had opened the piano, and was standing beside it. One swift chord, and she began to sing, as the sky-lark begins, without prelude or introduction, and, as it seemed, from the very fulness of her heart. It was her natural expression—effortless, free, spontaneous. Her bosom rose and fell, her throat swelled, and the room was filled with the soft, sweet notes of Heaven's harmony. "She can sing the soul out of you," Jim had said, and Doyle had laughed. He was not laughing now, but listening, spell-bound. And Vraille was listening—listening to the song that seemed to soar to Heaven's gates, and in passionate yet sad appeal, claim admittance as its right; for of the world it was not, and had never been; it had shaken off its earthly bonds and had soared, soared up and away, to its natural home in the blue vault above, where all was peace and joy and forgetfulness of evil; and even as it waited there and sang on, its sadness vanished, and its pitiful lament became a cheerful anthem of thanksgiving. The gates opened and it was admitted.

And so the spirit of the pure must some day free itself of earth's restraint and spread its silver pinions—soar in white raiment through the dreary darkness, and sit at Heaven's gate, pleading for admittance to the light. But the song that it must sing must be the song of cheerfulness.

Edith Dare's voice trembled on the last long note, sank, and died silently away.

"Why, where's the Major?" Tom asked suddenly; "he was here only a moment or two ago."

"I expect he's gone up to the nursery to look at little Jim," said Cicely.

CHAPTER VIII.

NIRVANA.

THE lodging-house called Guildhall Villa was sadly silent. A visitor was expected; a visitor to whom paupers and kings alike must bend the knee, and treat with solemnest respect; a visitor who raps at every door, from the lintel of the cottage to the portal of the palace; the grim guest who must be entertained, whether he stands at the cradle of the infant or the bedside of one babbling in second childhood. It was but the working out of the Inevitable Law—Nature's inexorable law, that swerves neither to the right nor to the left, and never flinches; knows neither mercy nor remorse.

In the midst of Nature's beauty and variety the gloom of the poor little household, cowering under the threatened decree, was but as a grain of sand in the desert of despair and desolation of the world!

The wheel of life revolves; night follows day, and summer winter; sorrow must follow joy, and joy sorrow. Nature smiles and frowns; now seemingly beneficent, now cruel; never vindictive—but always exacting the penalty of every mistake to the uttermost. The wheel of life revolves, and those who have erred through ignorance drop into the abyss beneath before their time has fully come; the rest live on—live on and

hope. And as they live, Nature presents to them her successive phenomena, beautiful and ghastly—all linked together and interdependent: the zephyr is followed by the blizzard, the warmth of summer sunshine by the lightning, the dew by the deluge, the growing of the flowers by the earthquake, the calm by the tempest, the light of day by the eclipse—plenty by famine, health by disease, life by death. The wheel grinds on eternally.

But how could Tom Starling, how could Cicely—how can any of us—be expected to pause and reason out these things? It only seemed to them terrible that such things should be as they were. Of life and death they knew nothing, except that life was sweet, death awful.

“Oh, I did not think he was so ill,” she cried, clinging to her husband’s hand as they sat together in their pokey little dining-room listening for sounds from overhead, yet hoping not to hear any. She was frightened; and even Tom was feeling a timidity he would not have confessed for the world. They were realising their utter helplessness. “I did not think he was so ill, Tom, or I could never have smiled when the poor, poor Major came back from London that night, and we drank his health, too, and laughed. Oh, I do wish we’d never done it;” and she put her arms round Tom’s neck and clung to him. “You’ll never get ill, Tom, will you? You’ll stand by me all through and never leave me, won’t you, won’t you?”

“There, there, little woman,” said Tom, comforting her; “I’ll never leave you; why should I? and I’m not in the least likely to get ill. Bear up, and be a

brave girl. Little Jim will very likely soon be right again ; children get well just as suddenly as they get ill you know. You must not be frightened at a little sickness in the house ; and we must think of them, not of ourselves."

"I know I'm very selfish ; I know I'm very wicked ; but, oh ! Tom, suppose it were little Cis. It might have been her instead—what should I have done then ? Major Vraille was right when he insisted that either she or little Jim must leave the house. He was not selfish when he arranged things so calmly for us, even in the midst of all his trouble, was he ?"

"No, Cis," said Tom, shortly ; "he is never selfish."

"How *can* he be so calm ?" she asked.

"Ah, I don't know ; perhaps it is that he has seen so much trouble in his time that he's got accustomed to it."

"He seems to walk more upright than he did when little Jim was well," she continued, talking, perhaps, that she might not think too much ; "and he holds his head so high that he looks stern and different to himself, and I feel frightened of him. He smiles at me, but never speaks."

"No," said Tom, "that's the worst of it—it's awful ; and I dare not, I simply dare not stop him to ask him questions. He's best let alone, poor chap."

"And Judith," continued Cicely, the tears springing to her eyes, "even now believes that little Jim has only caught cold in his throat and will get well."

"But does she really believe that, do you think ?" he asked.

"I don't know, Tom ; I don't know what she believes

in herself; but she says she is certain he will be well again in a day or two. She will listen to nothing any one says—not that any one wishes to undeceive her, poor soul—but always will have it that he is better; and when Dr. Doyle said it was diphtheria, she laughed at him and told him she knew better."

"Well, I for one, then, won't ever tell her it's diphtheria," said Tom.

They discussed these things in frightened whispers, and tried to account for them, but could not altogether—no, not altogether. But Edith Dare, who sat silently in her attic next the nursery, waiting to render any service she could, felt that Major Vraille's erect bearing and Judith's incredulity were cruel signs of what, unless something unforeseen should happen, must follow later on.

She had waited there all the day, listening to Judith's tramp upon the stairs, waylaying her, and imploring to be allowed to run her errands. The stairs were steep, and Mrs. Foresight had been treading them, day and night, night and day, almost it seemed without intermission. But her refusal was invariably the same. "No, no, miss, an' thank yer," was all she said; "I'm not tired, not the least in life. Time enough to rest when he gets well."

Death, it seemed to Edith Dare, was fighting against three resolute and courageous antagonists. Patience was not wanting in Judith, fortitude in Vraille, or skill in Dr. Dick; if energy and perseverance could save the little life, it would be saved. It was a great battle, bravely fought; but would not their strength, if not their courage, fail them? And if death should

win in the end, what then? Judith's repeated assurance, "better, miss; much better," had been losing by imperceptible degrees its sturdy tones of confidence—was even she, at last, beginning to abandon hope? Dr. Dick's pleasant face had assumed a quiet look of stern composure instead of its accustomed smile—would his energy flag, his nerve fail, or his hand tremble? and Vraillé, who waited and watched beside the child's cot, even as his dog, at that very moment, watched and waited at the doorstep in the street—what of him? Would nothing bend his head or penetrate the mask of his reserve? His spirit seemed indomitable, his courage undaunted. In doubt and apprehension he had been but a tender-hearted woman, and little more: now, he towered above them all—a man, a pillar of great strength.

Like the Starlings, Edith Dare felt her insignificance; but unlike the Starlings, she had often tried to reason out mysteries which seemed to her now more mysterious than ever. Why had she herself been so cruel as to mention the cruelty of Nature to him? It seemed as if Nature were now laughing at her in scornful derision. For the day was glorious. The noonday sun was shining on St. Dogwells, and shining with the self-same brilliancy on all that St. Dogwells contained, contemptible and grand alike—shining on Golden Hill and Guildhall Villa; shining on the medal that Vraillé's servant was polishing in the verandah of Fort Gaunt outside the Major's quarters; shining through the window of the little room where the Major's child lay sick—sick unto death.

Its rays glinted through the half-closed blinds, and

fell, now upon the hard outline of Judith's rugged cheek, now upon the healthy bloom of Dr. Dick's; then upon the father's grizzled hair, then upon the fair white pillow and the baby's golden ringlets. The sun shone upon them all—the three grave faces bent over the little cot, the tiny pale one with the thin blue lips twisted by suffering out of the form of their former loveliness.

At a signal from Dr. Dick, Judith went to the window and drew down the blind.

Is a life to be sacrificed because a baby unwittingly drank poisoned water or breathed foul air? That little frame is frail and delicate; that little heart is absolutely innocent; that little life is the source of much pure joy and happiness; it is the core of a woman's heart, the light of another life—is it to go out? To tell us that wisdom grows from age to age, is no answer *now*; to say that man will learn, does not help us *now*. Nature cannot teach us; we must find out her laws for ourselves. For Vraille, who has so often balanced these great questions in his mind, it is a terrible conflict of head and heart, intellect and emotion, reason and faith. No fear has ever made him tremble before; and even now his head is up, his back is straight. One hand grasps the bed-post like a vice; the other rests upon the baby's head with a touch as soft as down; his eyes are filled with compassion, love, despair, but he does not utter a single murmur of complaint. Oh! it is pitiful! But Nature cannot listen; her ears are deaf to pity.

Who knows what conflicting thoughts were battling behind in the arena of the father's inner consciousness?

A half-stifled whisper, "Not now—not yet," which fell upon the air unheard, might well have been an answer out of the whirlwind to a still small voice feebly pleading in the far-off distance of the past—"Suffer me to come to Thee."

The whisper died away unnoticed, even in that silent room where the only sounds which human ears could hear were those of the sick child struggling for breath and the ticking of a watch—the fleeting beat of Eternal Time sadly marking the last feeble beats of Transient Life.

"Jim," said Dr. Dick's calm voice, as he laid the little hand he had been holding gently back upon the coverlet, "it is our only chance."

"Do as you think best—implicitly, I trust you."

Then Judith understood.

"Oh, no, no, no, doctor dear! Take your biggest knife an' stick it inter *me*, if yer will—but don't-ee, don't-ee, for the Lord's love o' little childer, touch my little Jim!" She pleaded with hard, tearless earnestness and one deep sob.

"Judith, my brave, faithful Judith, listen to me a little."

He who had railed at ignorance so often and so bitterly put his strong arm round her and drew her to him. "We understand you," he said, as tenderly as if he were speaking to his child; "we know you would suffer any torture for his sake. But that would do no good; this may. It has to be, Judith; it must be; it is my wish—my order."

"Forgive me, master; I forgot. Trust me once again. There, try me now."

He knew he could trust her—trust her better than he could himself. “Brave Judith,” he had called her. Brave, indeed; not a tremor—true as the steel which pierced the baby’s throat—steady as the doctor’s nerve which guided it.

A short interval of suspense—and then her reward.

“It has cured him,” she cried, the woman in her asserting itself in spite of her manliness, and sinking on her knees beside the cot. “Ah! praises be to God on high! my baby-boy is cured—see, master; see, Major dear, how easy-like he breathes!”

But he did not hear her. Lifting his eyes from the baby’s placid face he raised them up to Heaven, and for an instant his lip quivered. Then he held out his hand to Dr. Dick.

“Thank you, Dick,” he said simply, and sank into a chair.

Judith pressed the baby’s hand passionately to her lips and breast for a moment, and then thinking perhaps that any show of emotion was a violation of her promise to her master, she rose from her knees and stole silently from the room.

Edith Dare met her, and taking her quietly by the hand, led her toward the attic.

“I can see by your face, dear,” she whispered, “that you have time now to think of your poor self. Come into my room; I have brought you up a strong cup of tea and have kept it hot.”

Judith, the tears still trickling down her cheeks and without making any effort to dry them, allowed herself to be led into Edith’s room.

“I ain’t ‘customed to cry,” she said when she was

composed enough to speak, "an' tears don't seem ter come nat'rally to my dry eyes, but all forced like and scaldin' hot. I ain't cried, miss, no, not since I were a girl no oldern you. But the sight o' my boy smilin' onst agin—to see un breathin' easy an' all comfortable and calm-like arter all his strugglin', an' real better arter all the weary waitin'—that made 'em come some 'ow. There, there; he's better—bless un; O God, bless un! so much better—an' I can dry 'em now, an' drink a sip o' tea if you'll 'scuse me, miss."

She drank her tea, a very little at a time, setting down the cup continually, forgetting even to stir it when Edith had helped her to milk and sugar, and talking all the time of the one subject that alone filled her mind and had filled it for years past—filled it full to overflowing for the last few days.

"I b'lief'd 'e 'ad a little cold," she said, "I *would* b'lieve it, 'cause if I'd listen'd to them doctors an' b'lief'd all they said instead, I'd been fit for nothing. They wanted to make me understand different p'raps, but what good would that a done? an' I couldn't, miss, I *couldn't*, d'yer see? I don't understan' their talk an' don't want; all I wanted was, ter see my boy get well, an' ter get un well, as master said, an' ter work my fingers to the bone for un—'cause 'e an' master's all I got ter care for in the world, an' when it pleases God ter take little Jim, it may please 'im ter take me too. I don't wanter live a day longer'n my baby-boy, 'cept for master if he wishes it."

In this incoherent way Mrs. Foresight partially explained the mystery of her disbelief. Edith, as she listened, felt strangely awed. Beside this woman's

ignorance how ignoble her own knowledge seemed to be ; beside her devotion how paltry her own pride. She stroked the grey hair, and kissed the rugged cheek ; she comforted and soothed and caressed the poor, sorrow-stricken soul, but with a feeling all the time that she would rather be kneeling at her feet telling her how she loved and respected her ; how, instead of administering consolation, she ought to be receiving re-proof at her hands for her own unworthiness.

" Yer see, miss," she said again, " I *had* ter run every blessed message for 'im myself ; I *had* ter wait on 'im hand an' foot myself ; I couldn't let—p'r'aps 'twasn't right—but I couldn't let any one, no not any one, do for 'im what I could do myself. Every grey hair in that head yer pattin's his, every single one on 'em ; an you'll please 'scuse me for 'aving——"

But Edith could stand no more. " Don't, Judith," she cried, burying her face in the old nurse's shoulder ; " don't talk to me like that. You make me feel like a miserable impostor. I'm not worthy, Judith, to go down upon my knees before you and lace your shoe. It is a reverence I have never felt before for any one in all my life—except for one other—yes, one other, only one."

But Judith did not understand all this ; it was beside the mark. She just looked at the girl for one moment and then went on, as before, talking of the boy, until at last she said that it was time to see how he was doing, and if he were asleep. " He is better," she said, " oh, ever so much better, an' if he'll only sleep, he'll be well again in a day or so, p'r'aps."

Poor soul ! This time she honestly believed what

she said. She peeped in at the nursery door and saw Vraillé and Dr. Dick standing by the window talking, and the baby in the cot lying fast asleep. She had time, then, to go and tell the Starlings the good news, and, with her hand in Edith Dare's, she and "the lady" who was so kind to her stole softly down the stairs.

Good news?

"I tell you honestly, Jim, my poor old fellow," Doyle was saying, "the chances are against us, but in that one, of course, must be our hope."

"Of course, of course," Jim answered very slowly; "we can but do our very best. I seem to see," he continued in the same quiet way, "that man's right arm alone wins him the victory, and that the chances are against him all along the line. Dick, we don't know, we don't know. I seem to have had my fill of suffering; but we don't know, we can only speak for ourselves. What is—what has been—what will be that poor woman's pain? If—if the boy should not recover, Dick, nothing will ever make her believe that he was not taken from her as a punishment for having loved him too much. That seems very horrible, does it not? The word 'vengeance,'" he went on, "should be expunged from the Bible. There is vengeance enough here on earth without our being threatened with vengeance hereafter. I am put here; I suffer; I love; and what I love is taken away. I don't believe in vengeance, Dick."

It was the first time for many days that Vraillé had said so much, and Dr. Dick seemed surprised to hear him speak at all. He looked into his face and

missed all its old fire and enthusiasm, though its earnestness remained ; he tried to say some kind words of hope and reassurance, but they seemed to die on his lips, still-born. The man to whom he was speaking was so terribly calm and dignified that he appeared to be exalted above the reach of human sympathy and comfort. The expression of his features was as tranquil as that of the child's sleeping peacefully in his cot, but the face was that of a man who had suffered all forms of sorrow and disappointment and could suffer no further ; not hopeless exactly, for determination and perseverance were written in every line, but filled with a sort of sublime pity, an ineffable compassion, that fell little short of blank, but grand, despair. Physically the last few days had worked a great change in him : his back was straight, but evidently straightened under an effort ; his lips were thin and colourless ; his eyes shone with an unnatural lustre ; his grey hair was now very nearly white ; and his whole demeanour betokened great strength tottering to a fall.

They were standing side by side at the window, gazing out upon the distant sea. The sun's rays were no longer falling on the baby's bed, but all along the rippling water they danced and leaped, laughing beautifully, out, far and away, to the horizon, where they kissed the sky.

"I know it, I feel it," he said, speaking under his breath, as if in a sort of dream, "I have felt it coming upon me for days past, with a slow, terrible conviction, —you think my boy must die."

"Not necessarily," Dick began ; "if we can keep the tube clear—" and there he stopped. He was a man

naturally cool and collected, and, as a doctor, disciplined to look upon sad sights and scenes with composure ; but the momentary look of hope in the grave eyes bent upon him, and its sad transformation into the old one of calm resignation, touched him more than any lamentation he had ever heard, and again killed the hopeful words upon his lips. “We shall all do our best,” Vraille replied ; “we can do no more ;” and he looked out at the water again.

“Look at that great sea,” he said presently, “a calm lake, the emblem of life and light and power ; the Infinity of space and time. Think of the finality of our poor, weak selves—the rivers of human life running down to the Ocean of the Infinite—for ever ; to be absorbed into that placid bosom of the Eternal. Tell me, Dick, do you really think that any living man could honestly thank God for taking from him his little Jim ?”

“Jim—Jim, I don’t know—I don’t know.”

“No,” continued Vraille in the same slow, dreamy way, “we do *not* know ; we should not pretend we do. We are but as a shaving driven on the crest of a wave—borne by a current ; onwards to that ocean, and there lost to human sight for evermore. No man has retraced his course—no Columbus, Dick, has voyaged back. We are as and what we are. God help us !” He paused again, his eyes still fixed upon the dancing water, and then went on, “The bitterness of death will have very little sting for me ; I seem to have passed through the valley of its shadow”—he spoke of the child’s life as if it were his own—“and you will know that at such a time I could say nothing but what is in my soul to say. I have suffered—suffered until I

think I have no more capacity for suffering, and yet the heaviest blow of all has not yet fallen. I have been so moved to pity by the things I've seen, that the bowels of my compassion will, I think, if I outlive this last ordeal, go out for evermore to the whole world, which, I can see now, is full, full of sorrow—much of it, most possibly, far greater than my own. I am thinking, Dick, of one object of the profoundest pity until my heart melts within me, and feels as mobile and fluid in my frame as that ocean at our feet. It goes out to her who is the mother of my boy : she was once my darling wife ; and, after all, I thank God she has been spared *this*. And if there be a God ; a Great White Throne and a Judgment Seat ; and an Infinite Mercy in that judgment, as we are taught to believe there is, may her forgiveness in that Great Day, when, we are told, there shall be a great august crowd whom no man can number—may her forgiveness then be as full and free as mine is of her now. And I would wish, Dick, that you would tell Miss Dare this—afterwards. Leave me now ; go down and get some tea or something ; leave me alone with my boy—I want to think."

He sat down by the child's cot, to wait patiently for him to wake.

Many a time had he seen the boy asleep before ; often and often had he watched at his bed-side ; but never, perhaps, had he felt so utterly alone with him as he did now. There, in a corner, where very likely the boy had thrown it, lay a half-open picture-book which he had shown him a hundred times, telling him the same absurd stories out of it over and over again, laughing to hear him laugh. How sad every word of

those absurd stories seemed now—how mournfully came back the echoes of that laughter! In many places on the walls, about two feet from the ground, were pencil marks which little Jim had made, and had been scolded for making, and were, as he had always explained, “on'y letters to daddee.” And there lay a little shoe; he had often buttoned that little shoe on the boy's foot, but never before had its awful emptiness struck him—it struck him now. He could remember buying that pair of shoes, choosing them for their thick soles rather than for their general elegance; he could remember how pleased little Jim had been at wearing them for the first time, and how, as the little chap held his hand and toddled along at his side prattling about them, he had kicked up the dust with them; and then—yes, he could remember that happy afternoon distinctly—how he had told him that he was not to kick up the dust, and how the boy had persisted in his disobedience until, at last, he had tripped and fallen, and picked himself up again, clapping his chubby palms together to rid them of the dirt, but had never even whimpered until an hour afterwards, when he suddenly discovered a minute scratch upon his knee, which instantaneously produced a flood of tears. Ah! those were very, very happy days. Were they gone now, never to return? Would he never hear that baby-voice again, eooing so happily, crying so piteously, laughing so heartily, chuckling so pleasantly, and ordering his “daddee” about so dictatorily? Oh! they were gone, they were gone, they were gone—best not to let his eyes wander round the room filled with recollections that threatened to unnerve him; best fix

them on the boy himself, while the boy was yet with him—asleep, sound asleep, lying on his side; and his dear face turned, as it always had been turned, towards his father; respiration easy, expression calm and tranquil, lips pink once more, arms and hands and fingers outstretched, lassitude and repose in every limb. Nature was fighting on their side; she loved life, especially young life; she cherished and fostered it; she only needed to be understood and helped to win; and if that were all—ah! she would have help, help to the uttermost.

It was not meant that those dear arms should never again cling round his neck, that that sweet breath should never again fan his cheek, that that dainty little mouth should never again form itself into a rosy pout for him to kiss. No; it was not meant—for even now he could hear the little voice calling to him, as it seemed, from the far, far distance, “daddee dear,” saying the words so softly and so sweetly—lingering over them as if it loved them, and growing fainter and fainter until its sounds were whispers—very soft—and as he listened very intently yes, very intently he fancied he could hear it repeat with its pretty lisp “’ffer me to come er Thee” and it laughed its quiet little laugh and the laugh died died slowly and very softly

The man was worn out; he had not slept for many days; he had known no rest of mind till now, and his chin had fallen upon his chest, but not that he might sleep; scarcely had consciousness begun to leave him, when he started and looked up.

“Is it all over?” he said. “Is he dead?”

"Lor, sir, no, his blessed eyes is wide open lookin' at yer, an' his sweet lips smilin' honey."

The light rustle of Judith's dress had been enough to startle him. He thought it was Something Else.

Still watching. Time had passed, with its fears and anxieties, its doubts and its hope. All was going well, the doctor said, but asked that his little patient might not be excited. The Starlings came to see him and brought him toys to play with; but he did not seem to care for toys, and left them lying near his hand untouched. Edith came to see him, and he recognised her with a smile. He was better, Judith said, much better, and by putting her finger where Dr. Dick had taught them to do, she could understand his whispers. The dog was waiting on the door-step for his master; the father was watching at the bed-side of his boy. They were alone together, Judith having gone into the adjoining room, and the rest downstairs in obedience to the doctor's orders.

He was bending down over the cot. The boy was not looking at the toys before him but wistfully into his father's eyes.

"Dadd-ee," came the feeble whisper.

"My boy?"

"Got er cold . . . in er ffroat . . . take it off . . . daddee."

"There, there, little man, don't talk—don't try to talk; daddy'll do the talking, while you listen."

"Better . . . to-morrow . . . hink . . . daddee dear."

"Yes, better to-morrow; quite well again soon." He picked up a toy from the counterpane and tried to amuse the boy with it, but little Jim, after watching it vacantly for a moment or two, suddenly looked up in his face again, and whispered—"Daddee."

"What is it, my boy, my dear boy?" He placed his ear close to the little mouth.

"'Anter see . . . er pictur . . . poor man . . . cumb-lin' down."

Jim knew that Judith kept that picture in the old Bible on the book-shelf; he brought it to the child and laid it on the coverlet.

"That poor man," he said in a soft, low voice, "never really tumbled down, little Jim; He could not, He was too strong. He was such a good man, baby boy, such a good, kind, simple man, that others fell—not He—fell down at His feet to bless and worship Him for His kindness, and say how very, very sorry they were for Him, and how they would try, because they loved Him so, to be like Him. And they did try—tried very hard, some of them; but they were so weak they could not stand up always, as He had asked them to try to do, but often fell—fell down and hurt themselves. But He was more sorry for them than ever they had been for Him; and He lifted them up and put them on their feet, and kissed them, and wept over them, and helped them again and again and again, no matter how often they fell, or even if they fell on purpose, and was never once cross with them but always very kind, because He loved them so. But he never fell Himself, sweet boy; never—only they."

Little Jim, who loved a story, even though it were a

story he did not thoroughly understand, silently listened to this simple tale, his eyes wide open with interest and attention, and when it came to an end whispered thoughtfully, "'Gain, daddee."

Jim told it him a second time, and at its conclusion added, "Perhaps, Jim boy, He will tell it you Himself some day."

"No, no, daddee tell it self—tell it 'gain."

He began to tell it again, but after the first few words, stopped suddenly, pressing his thin lips firmly together and clenching his teeth.

"Judith," he said quietly.

Judith came.

"Call Doctor Doyle—quick."

She cast one terrified glance at the cot, and without a word sped upon her errand swiftly, borne on the wings of fear and love. She had seen him look like that before, and knew what it meant.

* * * * *

"What is it, Jim?" asked Dr. Dick as he came rushing into the room.

"I thought it was all over; but he is better now." He turned away and walked toward the window. Doyle watched him attentively as he stood there looking out at the sea, and then without speaking took his seat at the side of the cot and scrutinised the boy's face anxiously.

Still watching; but the watching was beginning to tell its own story upon the father's haggard face and jaded mien; even as time was telling another and

a happier tale upon the child's. The boy was playing peacefully with his toys ; the father was once more standing by the window. It was the evening of just such another glorious day.

Out across the glittering waters the sun was sinking, down, down to his home in the placid sea ; out far away in the west, where the crimson clouds, like a host of exultant spirits, were rising up to meet him and convey him to his resting-place in all the glory of purple and gold ; out over the vast expanse of space and time did Vraille gaze with a calm face. Just such another day. Ah, his soul had been plunged in Hell ; it had leaped with one great bound out of the black valley of despair into the Heaven of high hope—agonized ; it was now resting tranquilly again on the bosom of Eternal Sea. He had reaped a great reward. The look of anguish on the poor child's face had been dispelled and replaced by another of intense relief and calm serenity by the magic of a man's simple action—that man himself.

The sun sank down and the golden waters danced ; the child played on, watched over by Dr. Dick and Judith ; the figure at the window turned to look at them—then back toward the sea again.

From the direction of Fort Gaunt, standing out in sharp relief against the sky, came the notes of a trumpet-call, borne gently on the breeze. It was *retreat*, the setting of the sun, the waning of the day. To-morrow and to-morrow and to-morrow—*reveille*, *retreat*, *lights-out* ! Life was but a day, soon over ; in death there was *no* sting, the grave could win *no* victory. If it were doomed that the boy should sleep, then he, too,

would wish to sleep, his spirit cradled in those tender arms, there to rest, on and on, and never wake again. It was well—so let it be. But if the boy were saved—saved that he might live, it was very well.

The sun was sinking fast, and here and there a star peeped out.

Any living man might say to himself that a hundred years ago he had never seen, had never even known of them. A hundred years ago this earth, its joys so called, its sorrows, its desolation and despair, for him were not; no terrible unrequited sympathies had stirred his heart; he had never realised the awfully mysterious isolation of man as he looked up to the heavens and saw the stars—the silent stars—and down to the earth and beheld the graves—the silent graves; he had never yearned to penetrate those mysteries into which the angels long to pry; he knew nothing, felt nothing, but was unconscious in his impersonality. Having lived, having seen, having felt, well might he exclaim—"Oh, give me that again!"

If the child were saved only that he might die—die, as it were, a second time—was it well? *Reveille, retreat, lights out*; not once, but a hundred times, day after day, day after day, making up the burden of the long, long day of human life—what then? A truncated cone, a broken column, a tree struck by lightning?—a man working hard, labouring with pick and shovel, digging a grave, and burying his frustrated hopes and the corpse of his dead desires out of sight—the old man dead, his ghost only visiting from time to time the scenes of his former life—the new man, propelled

through space and time by duty;—his isolation, his negation complete?

Reveille, retreat, lights out! Alone, alone, alone! Travelling on and on alone; but not for ever, no, not for ever. The child's tiny arm had been reached down to save; the little hand had been firmly held, and had led along a road of roses; the little dimpled finger was outstretched, pointing out the way, and soon, soon would be beckoning to follow. To practise good for its own sake, to gather up the fruits of experience and *pity* in complete self-abandonment, to be absorbed into that placid bosom of the Eternal without passion, parts, or personality. The calm lake of life and light and power, the source of all things, the light that lighteth every man who cometh into the world—Nirvana!

The sun was sinking, the earth would soon be dark, the waters black. Retreat had sounded some time now, lights out would come; and if, in the end, the little spirit were to merge and blend into his own, and the two be one, all in all, for ever evermore, it was still well. A smile, the first that had parted his lips for many and many a weary day, stole gratefully across the father's face, but faded sorrowfully away again as his eyes fell on Judith.

She had crept into the chair vacated by Dr. Dick, and was toying with the baby's hair, and talking to him cheerfully.

"Lalla loves yer," she said, "Lalla'll love yer all along. An' when yer go, sweetheart, yer'll take her 'long wid yer—won't yer, little Jim?—an' never think o' leaving her behind, 'cause she'd be so lonely-like without yer? None o' them relapses yet, as the doctors call 'em,

Major dear," she continued, looking round at her master. "The boy's me own brave boy, an' means ter get hisself again in 'bout a day or two. Look at Lalla once again like that, chick, an' jus' whisper, soft-like, so's not to hurt yer little self—whisper 'yes.' "

"Zes," whispered the boy, looking at her thoughtfully with his round blue eyes; "zes, boy 'erry 'ick—cold in his ffroat, hink; daddee took it off."

"Yes, daddee'll take it off for yer, sweetheart, daddee 'll take it off, an' Lalla'll take it off, and doctor'll take it off, an' then we'll all be well again ter-morrer." She had been softly smoothing his pillow as she went on speaking, and re-arranging his bed-clothes until there was not a crease or wrinkle in them that could annoy him, when she noticed the favourite print clutched tightly in his hand. "An' who gave the boy the pretty pictur, then?" she asked.

"Daddee; but er poor man neffer cumble down, Lalla—*neffer*."

Vraille's stern face smiled as it gazed out at the setting sun, fast sinking down, and preparing, as it were, to take his last long look of earth and blend into the sea.

He left the window, and seating himself beside Judith, put his arm kindly round her without speaking, and took one of the boy's small hands in his, and held it there.

The sun sank down; and presently, when they thought he might sleep again, there came a loud gleesome shout—

"Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!"

"Army Band sing 'Alleluia, ee s'all wear er crown,'" said little Jim.

"Lord, 'ow 'e do love them Salvationers, to be sure," said Judith. "There, hush then, dearie, hush, never mind 'em ; try an' go ter sleep."

Dr. Dick muttered something about sending Tom Starling out to stop them, and went softly down the stairs a little way, where they could hear him whispering his injunctions over the banisters to some one below.

"Alleluia ! Alleluia ! Alleluia ! "

"Ee s'all wear er crown," came the feeble response. Judith said, "Hush, dearie, hush-sh ! "

Only Vraille said nothing.

The sun sank down, and the dark waters danced no more. The noisy chorus approached nearer and nearer, and then ceased suddenly.

"Army Band 'top !" The boy tried to sit up in bed. "Ee s'all wear er crown. Oh, daddee dear——" and he sank back into his father's arms with a sweeter smile upon his lips than they had ever worn in life.

* * * * *

Sing on, Salvationists, sing on ! Seek to solve the silent mystery in your own noisy way, and may you win success ! Take the Kingdom of Heaven by storm, if you can—Alleluia ! There are some who cannot. Sing on, sing on, sing on—there is no need for silence now ; there are no ears to hear, for they are deaf ; no sense to feel, for sense is numb ; no soul to save, for it has flown—Oh, Alleluia ! The silver cord is loosed, the golden bowl is broken, the pitcher at the fountain is in pieces—Alleluia ! A little voice is dumb for evermore—Alleluia ! an honest heart is rent in twain—Alleluia ! an upright back at last is bent—Alleluia ! Alleluia ! Alleluia !

CHAPTER IX.

AN EPILOGUE.

Two years do not make very much change in a place like St. Dogwells, or go far either to establish improvements or redress grievances. There have been the usual succession of seasons, bringing rain, wind, sunshine, snow and frost, the usual rotation of crops, the usual indifferent harvests; but St. Dogwells is very much where it was. Fort Gaunt has been dismantled, and a new system of defence is about to be introduced; the walls of other public institutions have grown a trifle greyer, those of the public-houses a little greasier about the door-posts; the parish-pump has got a new handle, and the Salvation Army a new flag; but *ideas* have not advanced very much. Here and there a gap has occurred in a family circle, and different people are wearing crape, but others have gone back to colours again, so that that account with Time is fairly balanced. A fresh set of trifles has thrust its importance into prominent notice; old sorrows have disappeared, new ones have arisen; eyes that were wet are now dry; voices that were lamenting are now laughing. Joy and grief are playing at see-saw as they have done ever since St. Dogwells was peopled; but the amelioration of the human race as represented in the little town has not advanced by giant-strides.

The town commissioners are still arguing out knotty points amongst themselves, but the streets are no better paved or the houses better drained than formerly ; the churchwardens are still at logger-heads, but their “congregations” are, seemingly, no nearer Heaven than they were. Mrs. Bompas throws a somewhat larger shadow on the roadway as she struts along the street, with her nose disdainfully in the air and the weight of her purse threatening to tear the pocket out of her dress. Doctor Spill still remembers the dinner-party at her house, when he warned young Starling of the danger of having a cesspool in the garden, and is fond of telling the story to any one he can find not too busy to listen to it ; but, for all that, it is still there—and so is Guildhall Villa, furnished on the outside with a coat or two of fresh paint, and in the inside with a fresh set of lodgers, who have their experiences of St. Dogwells society to come. Colonel Taplow still cackles, and is still looked upon as a dependable man for news. Mr. Little and Mr. Brand are still striving to prop up the Church with doctrine, and knock one another down with dogma ; they still hold firmly to their respective creeds—High and Low, of which the principal article in each seems to be, as heretofore, *not* to believe in one another. Only once, since they first began to officiate in adjoining parishes, have they ever found themselves able to agree upon any definite point, spiritual or temporal ; it was when they discovered, severally and distinctly, that a certain Major Vraille, who lived for some time in Fort Gaunt under suspicious circumstances, and eventually died there, was an infidel, an unfaithful servant, an un-

regenerate sceptic, and that he died in his unbelief, refusing the means of grace, and, in their opinion, at heart an Atheist (with a big A). They had both of them endeavoured to pluck him as a brand from the burning at the eleventh hour. But instead of listening, he had argued—actually asking Mr. Brand whether it were not a cruel, or, at any rate, a foolish thing to tell a child ghost-stories just before sending him into a dark room alone, and begging Mr. Little who followed, to purge himself of cant, and think, if he earnestly desired to enter into the sorrows and perplexities of other people, and to strip a simple story, sublime in its simplicity, of all fantastic corollaries, if he wished it to appeal to a dying man. The recollection of these things is still green, not to say tender, in the memories of both reverend gentlemen, as a subject forming neutral ground upon which each can walk without fear of treading on the other's toes. But since that auspicious occasion, as before it, they have, upon most other topics, been as much at variance as ever. Yet are they both still right—each conscious of his own rectitude; both still wrong—each well aware of the other's faults and foibles; each still endeavouring to point out to the other the error of his ways; each still unable to make up the internal differences that exist amongst the members of the flock penned in his own fold. The spiral ascent of progress is as hard to climb at St. Dogwells as elsewhere, and St. Dogwells is very much where it was two years ago.

There is no more in St. Dogwells now than there was then to induce strangers to visit it, and just as much

leisure on the hands of the St. Dogwellites to notice and make remarks upon any who do. The arrival therefore of a gentleman, a lady, and her maid, at the Spread Eagle to spend a night or two there, has created a certain amount of comment amongst the humbler inhabitants of the place, especially as the names of the visitors are remembered by some as having been connected with an episode which caused a tremor of emotion to pass through the town some two years or so ago. A father and child had died of diphtheria almost at the same time, during the rainy autumn succeeding the driest summer ever known of late years in those parts, and had been buried in the same grave; and, it was remembered, too, that in life they had been devoted to one another;—rather a sad sort of story on the whole. The gentleman had paid his bills very regularly, and had been a kind gentleman; always seeming to have something in his pocket for the poor, and never saying an uncivil word to those beneath him, though it was believed he had a reputation for being a bit hoity-toity with his equals; and the child, a dear little boy, with pretty little manners, well-brought up, and nice-looking too.

St. Dogwells—the true-hearted, unimportant part of it, that which worked most and talked least—remembered these things with a sense of sadness, and when the little party from the Spread Eagle, the day after its arrival, strolled leisurely along the street, shopkeepers and cottagers nodded and smiled sympathetically at it, as if pleased to see it. When it reached the newly painted Guildhall Villa it stopped, the lady and gentleman standing side by side very close together,

and the maid (an old maid, rather, with iron grey hair and a hard, unprepossessing face covered with wrinkles) a step or two behind them. They all three looked up at the windows for a little while in silence ; then the lady said something to the gentleman, and he rang the bell. The woman who opened the door to them invited them to step inside with smiles and hand-shakings. After an interval of half-an-hour they reappeared, and continued their walk through the town, stopping every now and again, while one or other of the ladies, usually the elderly one, recognised an old acquaintance to whom she wished to speak.

They reached the outskirts of the town in time, and turned up the Chatterley turnpike road, when the gentleman, addressing the elderly maid, said kindly, " Judith, won't you let me carry the box for you now ? do, there's a good soul ; remember, we have a good twenty minutes' walk before us." He was a pleasant-looking fellow, faultlessly and very neatly dressed, with an imperturbable manner and a somewhat indolent gait ; not at all the sort of man one would expect to meet on a country-road carrying a largish cardboard box in broad daylight with a fairly warm sun shining overhead. Yet he seemed as thoroughly anxious to relieve the woman, whom he called Judith, of her cumbersome parcel as his self-contained demeanour would allow him to appear anxious about anything. He even reiterated his proposal three or four times ; but Judith said she preferred carrying the box herself. " No, sir, please," she replied, in a respectful but determined way, " lemme do this little thing for 'em myself ; maybe it's the last I shall ever have the

chance o' doing—little enough, poor dears, but somethin'; an' I likes to feel it's somethin', 'owever little."

"She'd rather carry it herself, Dick," the lady whispered, and they walked on in silence.

A bend in the road brought them in sight of a tall square stone tower surmounted by a pyramidal slate top, over which a brass fox swung slowly round on an axis passing through the pit of his stomach; his view was thus practically unlimited, and he could direct his attention to any point of the compass happening to lie up-wind, though, spitted as he was, he could not make that rapid progress towards it which the extended position of his neck, legs and tail indicated he certainly would do under any other circumstances. At present his head was turned pretty steadily toward the west, and his coat gleamed brilliantly in the sunshine against a background of thick foliage. He was the most conspicuous, and, perhaps, the most important part of the tower, the sole use of which, beside holding him and his information up to public view, was to support an insignificant bell with a still more insignificant tinkle; and the tower itself was the most conspicuous, though, of course, not the most important part of the parish church, of which it was the landmark and symbol. The church, standing as it did upon high ground among trees, with a cluster of white and pink cottages surrounding it, was picturesque enough from a little distance, but at close quarters looked old though not romantically antique, dilapidated without being interesting on that account, and seemed to wear an habitually melancholy and care-worn expression, due, apparently, to the studied neglect of mankind whose

treatment it had grown weary of lamenting, rather than to the buffets and ravages of wind and weather, whose insults were expected and consequently could be borne with comparative fortitude.

In that face of the tower which fronted the road was set a clock, like a great eye, looking mournfully down upon the graveyard below, watching as well as marking the progress of time. *Hic jacet, In memoriam, Requiescat in pace,* were the solemn words it read—written all round about it on the ground, here, there, and everywhere, over and over again, in languages dead and modern; on marble, on stone, on slate, on wood; in letters of black, red and gold; freshly painted, newly cut, fading, blurred, almost obliterated, quite illegible; day after day, week after week, the old, old story, always being repeated, though told in a hundred different ways, and without a chance of it ever being forgotten.

Upon one stone it was told twice over, in characters just beginning to be a little moss-grown and green, but still sharp and clear enough to tell it with incisive force: two names, the same precisely, one a little below the other, with “father of” in between; two dates, separated one from the other by an interval of only a few days; two ages—oh! that was perhaps the saddest part of this particular story; that was where it differed so much from the rest; that was where the eternal moral, set forth with mournful monotony in a hundred other places, was here pointed with a two-edged barb of irony that cut both ways at once—a man in the prime of life, a baby who had scarcely begun to live!

The little party of three stood together reading it,

the women hand-in-hand, the man bare-headed, all with figures bending slightly forward and nearly motionless, all thoughtfully and reverentially silent. Their silence, as if respected by creation, remained undisturbed by any outside noise; Nature itself in that place was strangely still, and seemed to be resting.

For some little time not a sound broke the stillness of the peaceful air, save the crowing of a distant cock in some farm-yard, a mile or more away it might be, and the occasional contented caw of a rook, in the trees beyond the church. Then, when a light breeze rustled through the cypresses and weeping-willows and made them bow their heads over those they mourned, startling a bird or two out of their foliage into the air with a half-frightened twitter, the young lady in the grey dress with the graceful figure and the pretty hair touched the gentleman standing at her side gently on the arm, and whispered a word or two in his ear. They then withdrew a little way apart, leaving the grey-haired woman alone, standing at the foot of the grave, her eyes fixed upon the reading on the stone.

Poor Judith! what was their grief to hers? They had seen her standing there on that very spot two years ago, her body twisted with the pain of having its living heart plucked out of it and flung with the earth down into that grave upon the little box lying on a larger one; a little child coffined on the breast of its father, where it had often so tenderly and confidently laid in life. They could remember her low moans which had interrupted the service—indecorously, as some said,

who did not know what had gone before, or how earnestly she had pleaded to be allowed to be present to the very end—and they were wondering now, perhaps, as they wondered then, how any man could have read the hopeful words with such signs of hopelessness before him and not falter.

Poor Judith! what was their grief to hers? The fulness of her double trouble they had, very likely, never really known. It had stunned her, and she had recovered consciousness after it only to live on in the hope of soon being herself taken to the place where those whom she had loved so devotedly had gone before. Time had deadened her pain, but the memory of those things would never fade; she was among friends—friends whom her dear master had himself asked to be kind to her even as she had been kind to him, and they had more than fulfilled his trust in them—but they were not the old friends whom she would never, never see again in life; she was devoting herself to fresh duties and finding pleasure in them, but they were not the duties in which her whole soul had been wrapped up, as those of tending on little Jim had been. She was contented, quite contented with her lot; it had fallen in very pleasant places, and she was surrounded by thoughtful and considerate kindness, affection even; but her real life was buried in that grave with her “master” and little Jim.

These were the thoughts that had prompted them to step aside and leave her alone with her box of flowers and her memories. They watched her as she opened the box and placed the white flowers on the grave; they watched her sitting there beside them in

her black dress ; and they felt it a privilege that they had been able to be kind to her, and registered a vow in their hearts that, whatever happened, Judith should find a home with them and never be forsaken.

"I'll go to her presently, Dick, but not yet—not yet ! She'd rather be alone."

"Yes," he said quietly ; "let us go a little way away."

They retired and took a seat at a little distance on a flat slab of marble engraved with gilt letters, and after a silence of some minutes, he spoke again.

"It seems awfully sad, Edith," he said, "that poor old Jim should have died, but I have learnt to think that it was best so. His death added the last link to the chain of his devotion ; every detail seems summed up. Poor chap ! it was fitting that little Jim should repose on the breast of big Jim ; and what a big man he was, Edith ! To me, the picture of him is complete in *that*. It could not have been otherwise."

"I have often wondered, Dick, why he should have been singled out of all of us, and why the disease should have been so terribly rapid with him ;—he seemed to run where little Jim had walked. Why was it, Dick ? do you know ? "

He looked up quietly, and with a thoughtful smile, replied—

"Well, I don't know, of course ; but I may as well tell you now that I have always had a suspicion that he inoculated himself from his child."

Her eyes questioned his meaning.

"You remember that afternoon when Judith came rushing downstairs, saying the boy was just as bad as ever ? "

"Yes."

"And when we got up to the room, only a few seconds afterwards, he seemed all right? Well, I fancy—mind, I don't know, but I fancy—the tube had got blocked and that Jim had cleared it. You know the sort of fellow he was; he would not hesitate, or say anything about it afterwards."

Her eyes now gleamed with enthusiasm as she looked at him.

"Ah!" she exclaimed, impetuously, "it must have been so. That is what James Vraille would have done—that is the way James Vraille died! It was a death worthy of his life. You are right; it could not have been otherwise."

"His death, like his life," said Dick, quietly, "was a lesson. He faced it, as he faced all things, with courage and with calmness."

"I used to think sometimes that the loss of his child would turn his brain."

"Edith, he was as sane as you or I: you should have heard him talking to those two parsons who came to see him; weak and helpless as he was, poor fellow, scarcely able to whisper, his moral grandeur made him a Saul—head and shoulders above the crowd of professed religionists; his earnestness, even, dwarfed them."

"He had very strange ideas upon many subjects."

"Not strange, I think, only natural, and, really, for the amount of reading and thinking he had done, very humble, simple and trusting. 'We don't know, we don't know,' he was always saying, whilst his *thoroughness* made him most intent on finding out all

he could know. When we were on service together, how he used to talk to me—poor fellow! to know him was an education. ‘We are so ignorant,’ he used to exclaim, too, with such sad earnestness.”

“Well, Dick, and what do you yourself think?”

“Just what he did—we don’t know, and never shall, perhaps; but, Edith dear, I don’t *think*, I *know* that if the great drama which Christ rehearsed for our instruction—feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, succouring the distressed and sympathising with the afflicted—be true, then I’d sooner stand on that Great Day in the shoes of Vraille’s ignorance than in the knowledge of others who boasted that they had called on Him by name. How can we advance that? How can we plant the standard of Truth an inch in advance of our generation? It requires more earnestness than I possess to go on striving after Truth which I feel all the time I can never find. But he, I believe, considered it a sort of duty imposed upon every man’s intellect to get as far as possible in the time allowed: and he used to say something about a man following the ray of his reason through the gloom of ignorance and fighting his way towards the dawn which heralded better things for the race if not for him.”

“That was what he meant, then, by wishing to leave behind him some monument to show that he had striven in the right direction. Oh! he has! he has!” she exclaimed. “I seem to see it.”

“In all ages there have been men,” Dick continued, his companion listening earnestly, “who have bared their brows to the blasts of popular prejudice, and have striven to advance that standard of Truth a

little way ; men who have sown in suffering what their children have reaped in joy—martyrs. And this is true in a minor degree of lesser men—men of whom the world has never heard, of whose heroism no one knows. . Fame, and ‘fortune,’ as it is called, they have never had ; and they may even have failed to realise any sustaining sense of the power of their own personal consciousness of rectitude. You know what I mean : they may be diffident before others and shy of themselves, lacking self-confidence, though imbued with a keen sense of duty. As a rule, those men don’t get on in the world, especially in the world of to-day, with its sensationalism, its love of theatrical effects and advertisement, all of which they look upon as shams, and resent as such.”

For a pleasant-looking, easy-going sort of man, who dressed carefully, considered his personal appearance, and appeared, to the outward eye, essentially the sort of fellow who “took things as they came,” this was a strangely incongruous speech ; but the girl seated beside him—who had learnt, perhaps, to understand him better than the casual crowd—saw nothing to be surprised at in the fact of his having made it ; she only looked at him admiringly, and replied—

“ Yes, Dick, you are right ; rewards were not for him—and, latterly, I don’t think he wanted any. I was vain enough once to think I understood him. I didn’t ; none of us did ; none of us could, most likely. I have even heard the Starlings say that they were not half kind enough to him, and they were very fond of him. Titles, ribbons, distinctions, Victoria Crosses, even if he had gained them, would not have lowered

him, but they could not have made him greater in my eyes. Poor, poor Major Vraille ! That terrible night when he groped his way down the stairs he was going back to Fort Gaunt to die."

"Yes, Edith, and I think he knew it, though he never said a word to me about dying ; only he set to work putting all his papers in order, and insisted on taking me entirely into his confidence."

"And to think that after all he had done for my father and for me he should have left me a fortune of my own."

"He never thought of that. His one idea was Judith : he wished Judith to be with you, and to die with the certainty on his mind that neither of you would ever feel the want of money. That was all ; except that I think, if the loss of little Jim had not made a hole in his heart through which everything else fell, he might have learnt to love you, Edith."

She was silent for a moment or two before answering, and then said slowly—

"Dick, dearest Dick, he was far, far above me. If I could only have felt that I might have made his life one little bit happier than it was—but that couldn't be ; he was beyond all comfort. Don't be jealous, Dick dear ; I don't wish things changed, ever, and never shall—but I *did* love him."

"I am glad. Knowing him as we both did, loving him as we both did, feeling and sympathising for him as we both do ; being, I firmly believe, better people for having known him, it could not be otherwise than it is : through him we met ; through him we were bound together by a common interest ; in

him, as it were, we lived ; and because of him, if for nothing else, we must, we always shall, love one another.”

“Yes, Dick dear,” she said.

They then talked a little about an “Aunt Dorothy,” for whom they both seemed to have a great affection, until at last Edith rose from her seat and said, “I must go to Judith.”

“Is there an organ in this church, do you know ?” he asked, suddenly, as he rose with her.

“Yes, a fairly good one—why do you ask ?”

“I’ll go and see if I can find the keys and some one to blow for you,” he said in his slow way, “and you shall play to us.”

Accordingly he strolled off in the direction of the porch, leaving her to join Judith.

“Dr. Doyle has gone to find out if we can get into the church, Judith dear,” she said, sitting down on the grave beside her ; “would you like me to play to you before you go ?”

“Yes, m’m,” said Judith ; “very much, an’ would yer please play some soft, sweet music as angels might like to hark to—the sorter music I’ve ‘eard yer play many an’ many a time when he”—pointing to the grave—“an’ my darling was still with us, not ’zackly sad, yer know, but gentle like, as if I was hushing a baby off ter sleep in my arms ?”

“Yes, Judith, I’ll try—will you come with us then, dear ?” she asked, taking her hand and kissing her.

“Presen’ly, m’m, please, presen’ly ; I’ve just one or two things left to say to him an’ little Jim, an’ then I’ll come. There’s the doctor beckonin’ from the

porch; the church is open. If you'll go on, m'm, please, an' play, I'll foller in one minnit."

So Edith went, and presently the soft sweet music, as soft and sweet as even Judith could have desired, rose and filled the air, and fell again, and died away, only to rise once more, and so to rise and fall in the soothing swell of a lovely lullaby.

"Can yer hear it?" she asked, bending down and kissing the green turf, "can yer hear the sweet music lillin' yer to sleep? An' can yer hear Judith talkin' to yer, sweetheart, an' feel her arms pressin' down to yer, longin', oh! longin' to take yer inter them an' hug yer to her bosom once, only just this once, afore she goes? Or, maybe, you are up above lookin' down an' crying to come to me, though I can't hear yer, an' it's best I shouldn't, for I could never bear to hear yer cry, least of all now, my darlin', my darlin', my darlin', when I could not come till it's His will to let me. Or are yer callin' kindly to me, tellin' me the time'll not be long—callin' to me with yer sweet voice, 'Lalla! Lalla'? Oh, Lalla'll come, little angel; she's ready now—an' then her grey hairs will be all gold like yours, an' her wrinkles will have been smoothed out, and her ugly face will be made beautiful, p'r'aps, as yourn is now, an' you'll love her, an' love her, an' love her, for ever. Don't-ee cry for her, baby pet, she'll not be long, now. The master said so, an' master never told a lie in all his life. The time'll not be long, he said, 'fore we all meet again; and the Lord love un for all his goodness to me, an' for kissin' me as he did when he was goin', an' for sayin' them kind words—mor'n for all the money he gave me, which is nothin' to me now.

So don't-ee cry, dearie ; Lalla's happy, Lalla'll soon be comin'. Good-bye, master dear, Judith's happy an' contented, as yer wanted her to be. Good-bye, baby-boy, Lalla'll come. No need ter say, 'God be with yer,' now, as you're both of yer with Him. Good-bye—good-bye—good-bye!"

She rose from her knees, and stood looking at the flowers. Stooping down again, she plucked a daisy, and, opening her dress, placed it in her bosom.

Then she turned slowly away and walked toward the church, where the music was swelling—swelling, it seemed, into a hymn of praise; importuning—nay, demanding—admittance into Heaven.

THE END.

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